

# **Work-Family Balance: The Importance of Family Focused Solutions**

introductory remarks by  
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The admired Swedish model of work-family balance has produced some serious negative outcomes for children, parents, families and in the public debate. A key problem seems to be that the model is governed by political ideologies, rather than by children's individual needs and the wishes and convictions of parents.

This does not only concern numbers and indicators about Sweden. I am Swedish. I have lived in Sweden almost all my life. I have worked 30 years in Swedish businesses as a consultant. I have seen businesses, schools, day-care centres and administrative offices from the inside. I follow the debate, I meet people and I study the research.

Why talk about a little country with hardly 10 million people way up north? Well, it is of course because Sweden is considered a model in family policies and work-life balance.

Sweden is a rich nation with an all inclusive social security, a high educational spending, healthy life-styles, low child poverty, and one of the best health care systems in the world. The material indicators are outstanding by international comparison and so the outcomes should be excellent. But in some respects they are not.

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To put it a bit bluntly: Swedish parents simply don't have enough time for their children because they are busy working to keep down material child poverty.

## Initial family model ingredients in 1975 initiation

- \* **A highly subsidized day-care at low cost to parents.**
- \* **Day care financed by high taxes.**
- \* **No support to home care, granny care or neighbor care.**
- \* **Encouraging a high level of female employment.**
- \* **A strong focus on gender equality.**

The ingredients that has given the Sweden its status of having the leading model in work-family balance are these:

- A highly subsidised day-care at low cost to parents, originally of high quality. (But since the early 1990s quality has dropped)
- Day care financed by one of the world's highest tax rates.
- No support for home care, granny care or neighbor care.
- A high level of female employment.
- A strong focus on gender equality.

## Envisioned outcomes of the Swedish family model

- \* **Greater gender equality.**
- \* **Improved child social development.**
- \* **Improved child academic development.**
- \* **To even out social-class differences.**
- \* **Liberating mothers from motherhood instincts.**
- \* **Greater adult life satisfaction, through more employed work, and less family work.**
- \* **The "work policy" – every adult in employed (tax-creating) work – every child in day care.**

This family model was believed was to manifest the following:

- Greater gender equality
  - Improved child social development
  - Improved child academic development
  - To even out social class differences
  - To liberate mothers from motherhood instincts – which in Sweden often are claimed to be a social construction.
  - Greater adult life satisfaction through more paid work, and less family work.
- None of these goals have been reached, they are all more or less unsuccessful.

Still the vision of both political camps in Sweden is "the work policy" – every adult in paid work, every child in day care from the age of one.

Swedish women did not want this model in 1975. But it was believed to eventually be accepted. But today, 35 years later, a majority of all Swedes, still don't want it, including the young mothers. The few stay-at-home-mothers left in Sweden today both want to work and to have children, *but they do not want it at the same time* – a entirely new paradigm of self-chosen work-family balance.

## The Swedish family model

- \* **No babies in day care – only parental leave first year.**
- \* **A full 92% of all 18 month-5 year olds in day-care.**
- \* **Day-care low cost to parents, 90% tax subsidized.**
- \* **Day-care subsidies > 20 000 USD per child/year.**
- \* **No national home care allowance – no tax benefits.**
- \* **Day-care and dual-earner household strongly encouraged both culturally and financially.**
- \* **Home care is discouraged and somewhat socially marginalized. Homeschooling illegal.**

Here is how the model looks in Sweden today:

- No babies in day care – only parental leave first year. Great, but then comes a dramatic shift.
- A full 92% of all children 18 month to 5 years of age are in day care.
- Day care is of very low cost to parents, typically 100-250 USD/month.
- Day care tax subsidy: more than 20 000 USD per child and year.
- No national home care allowance, nor home care tax benefits.
- Dual earner day care-model strongly encouraged both culturally and financially by the tax system and every government institution. Parents will be persuaded, during medical checkups of children, on government institution home pages and through media, that children above one year of age need day care for their development, and that parents need work for their well-being. There is, of course, no scientific consensus on any of these claims. It is much more political ideology.
- Home care discouraged and socially marginalized. Another issue is that home schooling in effect illegal, which nevertheless illustrates the Swedish government view on family.

With more than 30 years of experience with this model we now know some of its outcomes. If you have seen Sweden as a model these facts may disturb you.

## Actual Swedish model outcomes

- \* **Deteriorating psychological health in youth.**
- \* **School results – from top to average in 30 years.**
- \* **Serious discipline problems in schools.**
- \* **High rates of sick leave, especially among women.**
- \* **Day care staff top the sick leave statistics.**
- \* **Deteriorating parental abilities, even middle-class.**
- \* **High gender segregation in labour market.**
- \* **Plummeting quality in day care – politics can't keep it up.**
- \* **Democratic debate on the issue difficult.**

- **Deteriorating psychological health in youth**

Psychosomatic disorders and mild psychological problems are growing at a faster rate in Sweden than in any of 11 comparable European countries. Since the 1980s they have tripled among girls and young women and now affect one out three girls. All according to a Swedish government study.

- **School results – from top to average in 35 years**

Sweden used to have among the best school results in the world 30 years ago. Today Sweden is merely average, and actually below average in maths according to the PISA report.

- **Serious discipline problems in Swedish schools**

According to the TIMMS report Sweden has among the most serious discipline problems in schools in Europe including, truancy, tardiness, disturbances in classrooms and bad language.

- **High rates of sick-leave, particularly among women**

A study in the Swedish medical journal *Läkartidningen* 2005 has the headline: "Who can work until 65 years of age? – not the women, more than half quit work life early". Psycho-social issues cited as the strongest reason. This is the first genera-

tion of Swedish women trying out the Swedish model of work-family balance.

*One can ask what was gained by forcing a work-family balance of child care and work at the same time, if one anyway loses ten years of work because of early retirement?*

- **Day care staff top the sick leave statistics**

Three Swedish experts say it is caused by the “lack-of-meaning syndrome” in the deteriorating quality of Swedish day care. Day care personnel were trained for a job they cannot perform because of too big group sizes and child-to-adult ratios.

- **Deteriorating parental abilities**

An EU-sponsored study shows that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties being parents today. The researcher says they lack knowledge about children’s needs and cannot set limits. She continues:

*The public offer of full day child care seems to make many parents loose the grip of their own responsibility. They believe/want that their children are fostered by the pre-school/school and believe that the experts on their children are found there.*

The researcher also says that pre-school/school cannot fill the gaps caused by lack of time and trust in parenthood from the parents.

Several scientific disciplines will point to a causal effect of the Swedish model and these outcomes. These disciplines include developmental psychology, attachment theory, developmental science and neurobiology.

- **High gender segregation in labour market**

Sweden has one of the most gender segregated labour markets in the world – not only the western world. The Swedish model has not produced general gender equality, many other nations do it better with other models.

- **Plummeting quality in day care – politics can’t do it**

The quality of Swedish day care in terms of group size and child-to-adult ratios was high in the 1980s, but since the financial crises in the early 1990s the quality has continuously deteriorated, even today in spite of a very strong Swedish economy. Three Swedish experts conclude that Swedish day care is no longer of high quality, and that today’s lower quality may be developmentally detrimental to sensitive children. The 20 000 USD subsidy per child and year is not enough to provide quality today.

*One could ask: If a rich country with the second highest tax rate in the world can't provide subsidised comprehensive day care of high quality, then who can?*

- **Democratic debate on the issue difficult**

Both media and civil servants avoid discussing the issue in media due to fear of awakening guilt. Culturally day-care is so ingrained today that in the Swedish official report from the CSW (Commission on the Status of Women) this year, criticised some African countries and the Vatican for using a terminology which was said “not to be in alignment with Swedish positions”. These terms were: “ethical dimensions”, “ethical values”, “maternity”, “motherhood” and “the right of families to choose education for their children”. This view is no mistake, it is fully in alignment with other statements from the Swedish government.

***The root of the Swedish problem is that our government uses work-family balance to coerce Swedish families to an ideology which disempowers family, and which a many Swedish parents don't want.***

The root of the Swedish problem is that our government uses work-family balance to force Swedish families to conform to an ideology which disempowers family, and which a many Swedish parents don't want.

The lesson is that it is wrong for government to use financial or cultural pressure to get parents to conform to a specific family ideology. Be sceptical of top-bottom solutions. Children are different and families are different. Parents have to make



the choice of child care and work-family balance. It is an existential question. Parents will find all kind of different solutions: day care, child-minder, home care, granny care, neighbor care or otherwise. The state needs to support all solutions in a neutral and fair manner, *never favouring parental care less*.

I am convinced that it is quite easy to start a positive process in Sweden. Sweden needs a general generous home care allowance, and a neutral attitude from the state giving the message to parents: "You are the parents, you know your child best, we want you to make the decision you feel is best for your children and your family. Whatever you choose we will support."

**Thank you for  
your attention!**



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