

English summary

# Corporal punishment and other humiliating behaviour towards children in Sweden

- a national study 2011

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### Result from two nationally representative studies in 2011

The 2011 national Swedish studies on corporal punishment and other humiliating behavior towards children are a follow up of earlier studies performed in 1980, 2000 and 2006. The purpose of the studies is to describe the current situation for Swedish children and trends over time concerning various forms of humiliation, with special emphasis on events at home, but also those occurring at school.

A number of smaller investigations concerning child abuse have been performed in Sweden since the 1960s, but the first representative national investigation was carried out in 1980, the year after corporal punishment was banned through the Swedish Parental Act of 1979. The investigation in 1980 was an interview of 1105 families, where the parents responded to questions about their upbringing practices with respect to a specific child during the past year. The Conflict Tactic Scale methodology used in these interviews was created in the 1970s by the American researcher Murray Straus. In short it means that the conversation is introduced by talking in general about family matters and thereafter about potential conflicts in upbringing situations and how the parents have tried to solve these. Finally the interview aims at potential violence against the child, how frequent it was and how severe. This methodology has been used with success in many countries. By gradually approaching topics that are more loaded with taboo it has been possible to get a fairly good picture of family life and violence towards children. Whether or not this is true in the current Swedish situation, where the taboo against smacking children is very strong, is not immediately obvious.

National Swedish parental studies using the same methodology have been performed in 1980, 2000, 2006 and 2011 (current study). In 1980 and 2000 the studies were performed through telephone interviews, but in 2006 and 2011 postal questionnaires were used, mainly for economic reasons .

Nationally representative studies of adults' attitudes about corporal punishment of children have been performed in Sweden regularly since the 1960s. The first national questionnaire directed to school children concerning their experiences of corporal punishment and humiliation was performed in 1994/1995. This questionnaire has been gradually developed thereafter in the 2000, 2006 and 2011 studies and now also contains questions about children's health, bullying and the individuals' access help and support in difficult situations.

To our knowledge no other country had been able to perform regular national studies of this kind, where both parental behavior and children's experiences of punishment have been recorded. For this reason the studies have been of interest not only in Sweden but also at an international level.

### The aims of the 2011 national studies have been:

1. To evaluate if parental corporal punishment or other humiliating actions towards children have increased or decreased since 2006.
2. To study if the last fifty years' gradually increasing negative attitudes towards corporal punishment of children have become even more obvious in Swedish adults and children.
3. To evaluate if bullying at school and during leisure time has changed in frequency and pattern and how it relates to corporal punishment in the pupils' homes.
4. To describe the most prominent risk factors for child abuse
5. To evaluate if the detection rate of child abuse in the health care sector, at pre-schools and schools has improved compared to previous surveys.

## The 2011 national studies have consisted of two main parts:

- A. A **postal survey to parents** about their upbringing of a specific child during the past year. A nationally randomized sample of 2500 children 0 – 12 years of age was drawn from the national register of the total population. These studies have previously concerned children 0 – 17 years of age. All earlier Swedish studies have shown that children who are punished corporally are mainly of pre-school age, and if a child has not been smacked before the age of twelve it is unlikely that it will occur later on. For this reason the current study was limited to children under thirteen years of age. The parental response rate, which in previous studies has been 77- 80 percent, was only 55 percent in the present survey. However, compared to recent similar Swedish studies this is a fairly good response rate. The drop out analysis has not been able to show any major differences in background factors between responders and non-responders.
- B. A **class room survey in grade 9** was completed by 3207 pupils in 158 schools all over Sweden. In earlier studies these surveys have also been aimed at younger school children, but for ethical reasons the 2011 survey was limited to the older pupils 15-16 years of age. Not a single pupil at school on the day of the survey declined to participate.

Aside from the two studies described above, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (abbreviated BRÅ in Swedish) performed a detailed study on police reports of child abuse, which have increased substantially over the last decade. The total picture of the 2011 studies and comparisons with older studies will be presented briefly below.

## The increase in cases reported to the police reflects more frequent reports of neglect

Since the mid-1980s, Suspicion of child abuse has gradually become more frequently reported to the police forces in Sweden. Due to the substantial

increase in reports during the 1990s the *Governmental Committee on Child Abuse and Related Issues* commissioned BRÅ to study this in detail. It was shown that the increase depended on a greater tendency to report abuse and there were no indications whatsoever that severe abuse of children had increased in Sweden.

Police reports have continued to increase. During the period of 2001 – 2010 there was a 62 percent increase for children 7 -14 years of age a 176 percent increase for children below seven. The current investigation shows that cases of physical injury due to abuse have not increased; on the contrary there has been a relative decrease in such cases. The increased number of reports is the result of a greater tendency for the social services to report to the police. These cases originated mainly from pre-schools or schools and concerned neglect more often than previously. A part of the increase is judged to depend on an increase in more qualified examinations at so called “Barnahus”, multidisciplinary facilities where investigations are carried out by professionals from several authorities in cooperation.

## Nine out of ten parents state that it is wrong to spank children

The majority of all parents, independent of sex, age, education, native country and the age of the child, states that the most important task for upbringing is to teach their children not to fight, tease or threaten but to be concerned and honest. The last two aspects are particularly important for older children.

Ninety-two percent of the parents responded that it was wrong to beat or slap the child, even if the child had made the parent very angry. Parents born abroad and parents with low educational level had a more positive view towards corporal punishment than the others. The percentage of parents who approved of corporal punishment decreased substantially in the adult Swedish population between the 1960s and the 1990s and has since remained quite stable at about seven to eight percent. From an international point of view, apart from the neighboring Nordic countries, this is a very strong negative attitude towards corporal punishment.

The common way of handling conflicts is now to discuss with the chil-

dren, particularly if they are six years or older, or to divert the attention of younger children. Three out of four parents also stated that it was not right to grab or shake the child at any time. Parents of children under the age of two, parents with university-level education and women born in Sweden were the most negative to this kind of parental behavior.

## Swedish parents seem to have stopped shaking their infants

Almost half of the parents stated that they were tired when the last conflict occurred with their child, one third had been under stress and one in six was sad. Above all, everyday stress was the factor that led to harsher discipline such as pushing, grabbing and shaking. Almost one third of the parents had done so and this behavior was more prominent in Swedish born parents than in parents born abroad and was substantially more prominent among parents who had been beaten themselves as children.

After the great decrease from fifty percent in 1980 to twelve percent in 2000 with respect to pushing and shaking children it has gradually increased to twenty six percent in 2006 and to thirty percent in 2011. This behavior is most prominent towards children between two and nine years of age. No parent admitted to have shaken an infant. This may hopefully be a result of the intense information campaign against shaking small children carried out in the interim since the 2006 year study. Another positive result is that no parent admits to having beaten a child below the age of two.

About three percent of the parents stated that they had beaten the child during the last year, but no parent more than ten times. Parents born abroad state that they have beaten their child more often. Since the very substantial decrease of parents beating their children (during the preceding year) from 1980 (28 %) to 2000 (1.1 %), there has been a slight and gradual increase to three percent in 2011. It should be noted in this context that the study in 2000 was performed using interviews and that the studies in 2006 and 2011 were performed using non-identifiable postal questionnaires.



## Family violence is the most dangerous risk factor for child abuse

The school study draws upon the pupils' experiences from their whole life as far back as they can remember. To a great degree the children confirm what the parents describe, but they also give a somewhat darker picture of their lives. Fourteen percent of the pupils state that they have been beaten any time in their life and three percent have been beaten several times. This share of pupils is almost exactly the same as in the studies in 2000 and 2006, so there is no indication of any increase. Children born abroad, particularly boys, state that they have been beaten more frequently. The outstanding risk factor for corporal punishment is, however, violence between the adults in the family. This gives a ten-fold risk increase compared to families where there is no inter-adult violence. This risk decreases insignificantly when adjusted for other risk factors such as single parenthood, weak family economy or immigrant status. If parents were affected by alcohol or drugs when the conflict with the child occurred, there was a significant risk (60 %) that the child was beaten.

As in the former studies in 2000 and 2006, children with chronic diseases and disabilities state that they have been beaten twice as often as the healthy children. They also live to a greater extent in families where family violence occurs.

## Corporal punishment affects children's life negatively in many ways

Being beaten at home affects the child negatively in ways other than the humiliation and risk of injury. Beaten children have a much greater tendency to be involved in bullying than other children. They perform less well at school, have substantially more physical and psychological symptoms and have been involved in accidents more often.

There have been speculations that Swedish parents, who no longer beat their children, instead are insulting them. The statements from the pupils point to the contrary. There is indeed a very strong connection between humiliation and corporal punishment.

Eighty percent of young people who have been beaten feel that they have some other person they could have turned to if they needed to, but only seventy percent actually did so. Most children confide primarily in a peer and secondarily in a relative. Twelve percent have confided in school personnel, a youth clinic, social services or the police, while seven percent have turned to nongovernmental children's rights organizations.

## No major changes in later years

In summary we can see that the majority of Swedish parents (92 %) still have a very negative opinion of corporal punishment and it is quite uncommon to have beaten a child during the last year (3 %), even when slaps are included. For Swedish-born parents this figure is even lower (2 %). Fourteen percent of Swedish sixteen year old pupils state that they have been beaten at least once in their lifetime, which is exactly the same as in 2000 and 2006. In accordance with the parental study children born abroad are more exposed to violence in their families. The outstanding risk factor for corporal punishment is violence between the adults in the family. If the parents are affected by alcohol or drugs when in conflict with the child, the risk of the child to be beaten is considerable.



It is of paramount importance that the existence of child abuse in Sweden is monitored by the use of regular studies. The primary reason for this is to notice changes and thereby adapt preemptive measures for altered patterns of abuse. Children's and parent's own experiences and attitudes toward parenting and corporal punishment are the only reasonably reliable indicators that abuse is taking place, whilst secondary accounts such as police charges and other social reports are usually substantially underreported.

This is a summary of the third national study of parents' and children's experiences and attitudes about corporal punishment and other humiliating behavior towards children in Sweden.

Children's welfare foundation Sweden (Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset) is a public foundation with a mandate to support method and knowledge development for those working with children and youths exposed to abuse. The foundation funds social research into children and youth, manages its own development projects, organizes conferences and seminars to spread awareness and distribute literature pertaining to current issues.

Books and reports can be ordered from [www.allmannabarnhuset.se](http://www.allmannabarnhuset.se)

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