

# **“Combating violence against children: from isolated actions to integrated strategies”**

**“Obligatory reporting of violence against children: Norwegian experiences.”**

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**Picture nr. 1:**

My name is Tove Narud and I work in the county governor's administration in Oslo, Norway. My field of work is child welfare.

First of all I would like to thank you for asking me to come here to take part in this very important conference.

I am going to talk about obligatory reporting of violence against children and Norwegian experiences in this field.

It is a difficult topic - but it is essential that these questions are discussed so that children as far as possible can be protected from violence, neglect and other forms of ill-treatment.

**Picture nr 2: Main points:**

These are the main points that I shall talk about:

1. Norwegian legislation
2. Norwegian experiences
3. One example from Norway
4. A brief summary

**Picture nr 3: Norwegian legislation:**

In Norway we have a Child Welfare Act to protect children at risk. This Act gives each municipality a duty to have a child welfare service for handling the concerns about the well-being of a child.

This law states:

“Notwithstanding the duty of confidentiality, public authorities shall of their own initiative provide information to the municipal child welfare service when there is a reason to believe that a child

is being mistreated at home or is subjected to other forms of serious neglect.”

This implies a duty for everyone publicly employed to report to the child welfare services if they discover that a child is subject to serious neglect in its home. This duty includes employees in kindergartens, teachers, doctors, nurses, health care workers, the police and others.

In our country this duty to report comes into effect when ”there is reason to believe” that the child is subjected to violence or other ill-treatment. Proof of this is not necessary. Signs that indicate this is enough.

The child welfare services must find out if the child has been abused or not. In case of serious abuse, they can report to the police, who then investigate the matter as a criminal case.

#### **Picture nr. 4: Norwegian experiences:**

In Norway we have focused strongly on the fact that anyone working with children must report any serious concern they may have to the child welfare services.

The question is then: How does this work in Norway and what have we experienced in this field?

1. First of all we have a long tradition for this obligatory reporting.
2. Secondly, we have worked systematically to increase the knowledge about the child welfare services and the duty to report. Throughout the country there is now an increase in reported concerns.
3. Furthermore, we have had an increasing focus on the question of violence and the sexual abuse of children. And the fact that this has serious effects on their physical and mental development.

This also applies to children who have been witnesses to violence. To be a witness to violence can sometimes seem even worse for a child because the situation gives it a feeling of complete helplessness. So in Norway there has been a growing knowledge and understanding of how serious it is for a child to be the victim of violence and other forms of ill-treatment.

4. Finally, we have in recent years had some very serious cases of violence and sexual abuse of children in Norway. They have been referred to in the media and have led to a heated public debate as to why these cases were not reported to the child welfare services. These cases have played an important part in changing public opinion. More people now ask why the child welfare services did not intervene to stop the massive ill-treatment.

The media therefore play a key role in shaping public opinion and making people aware of the need to report to the child welfare services.

The question is then: Who do the reports come from?

Research shows that teachers often report. It may come as a surprise that many parents also contact the child welfare services themselves. Because when the children become adolescents, many parents find that they cannot handle them anymore and that they need help. Social services workers also report. The police do so too. The police come in contact with many children. They have now a routine of reporting to the child welfare services whenever they are called out because of domestic violence or for other reasons.

The next question is: Who do **not** report?

1. We see that doctors and health workers do not report their concerns as much as we would like. This is rather strange, since it is they who treat the children for the injuries they

suffer as a consequence of abuse and violence. In this respect it is a great challenge for Norway to make sure that doctors to a much greater extent comply with the requirements of the law.

2. Most children in Norway go to kindergarten. It is strange that few reports of concern come from the kindergartens. Only 4 % of the concerns come from the kindergartens. In Norway we believe strongly that if the child welfare services can help families at an early stage, they can prevent serious neglect and damage to the child.

Therefore it is desirable that more kindergarten employees report their concerns to the child welfare services so that one can investigate to find out if relief measures are needed in the home or not.

Kindergarten workers have however said that they are uncertain about when they have an obligation to submit reports.

To meet this uncertainty our department has published guidelines for those who work in kindergartens, guiding them so they can be aware of their obligations to report bad conditions. There are also instructions to ensure better co-operation between kindergartens and child welfare services.

This means that in the future it will be easier for the kindergartens to contact the child welfare services and report suspicion of abuse and violence.

3. In Norway a great part of the challenge is to make the obligation to report violence and abuse a part of the education. This must become a subject at colleges and universities so that students have been made fully aware of their duty to report violence and abuse against children.

### **Picture nr 5: The invisible boy**

I want to tell you about Christoffer. You can see him here. He only lived to be eight years old. The reason was that his stepfather beat him to death. His stepfather was convicted for the crime and is now in prison.

So in this case a little boy was beaten to death without anyone around him reporting the abuse, even though many witnessed it. But they closed their eyes.

How can it be that none of the professional adults around Christoffer reported to the child welfare services what they saw? They had a legal obligation to do so.

One cannot really say. This case appalled all Norway when it was known. The media have told the story to such an extent that very many people ask themselves how such a thing can happen. Why did not the doctors, who treated him for his injuries, report? Or why did his teachers, who found him so beaten that they sent him home from school, not alarm the child welfare services? And what about everybody else who saw the condition he was in?

Before his stepfather moved in with Christoffer and his mother, Christoffer was known by all as a lively and inquisitive boy. But then his behaviour gradually changed. He became quiet and in the end almost invisible. He did not make himself noticed. But he often showed up badly bruised in his face and on his body. When the mother was asked about this, she told the school that he must have hurt himself. And this was accepted as an explanation.

Violence and abuse of children is strangely invisible. How can we highlight this invisible violence so that the child can be taken care of and given the protection it is entitled to?

## **Picture nr. 6: Summary**

### **Legislation:**

Norway does have the necessary legislation in this area.

As a society we have an obligation to protect our children. Therefore legislation on obligatory reporting for public employees in cases of violence and abuse, is absolutely necessary.

### **Education:**

I firmly believe that legislation, although necessary, is not enough. The individual must be taught what this obligation implies, how to recognize signs of ill-treatment, from what point action must be taken, et cetera. In my opinion this must be made as a part of the education of teachers, doctors, kindergarten personell, health- and social workers. They must not be in doubt how to act in a case where there is concern for the welfare of a child or one suspect's abuse.

### **A positive attitude:**

In addition to this - it is vital to develop the understanding that when one suspects violence or abuse, it is in the interest of the child that the case is reported to the right authorities.

It must be commonly accepted that the best thing for children are to report one's concern to the child welfare services.

Cases like the Christoffer-story have made more and more people understand the importance of reporting their suspicions. The coverage by the media has helped in this. When the media present a story and ask why the child welfare services were not alarmed - something happens to the attitude of the public. After the Christoffer-case, - and

some other similarly grave examples of sexual abuse, it has therefore become more and more accepted in Norway that reporting is the best way of protecting our children and revealing the unseen violence.

It is for the benefit of the child that these cases are reported.

Thank you for your attention.