

## Secure Children – Secure Parents – The Role of Family in the 21st century

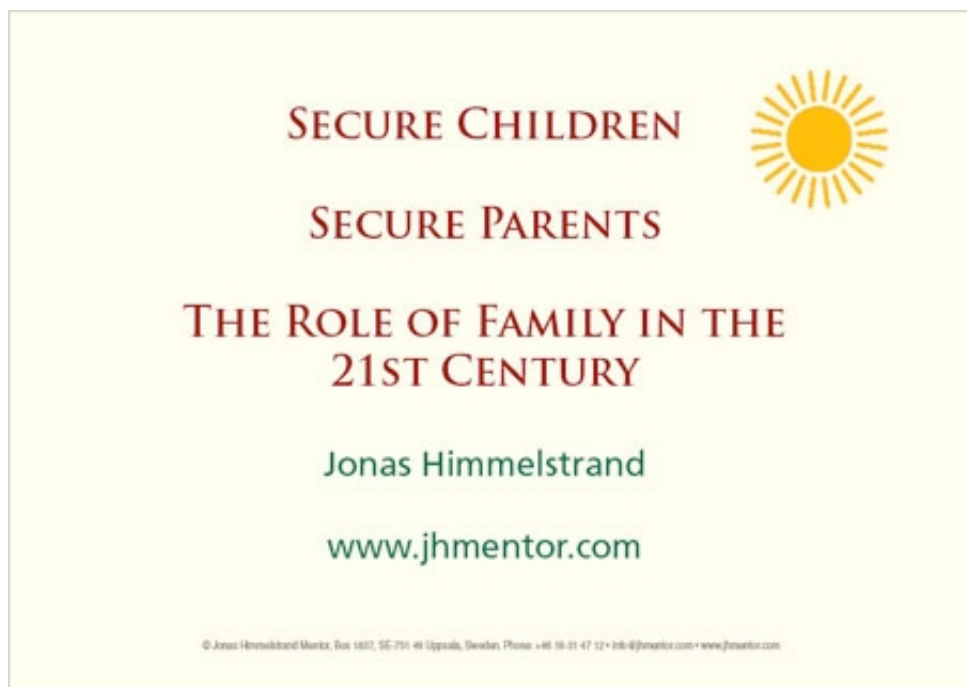
**Presentation given by Jonas Himmelstrand at a seminar in the Swedish Parliament on December 10, 2008. Translated to English by the author.**

Special note to English speaking readers:

This presentation was given in Swedish to a Swedish speaking audience. In order to fully understand it the following two background facts may be necessary:

1) Sweden's family policy exclusively supports the dual earner household with children in day care. Today 85% of all 1–5 year olds in Sweden are in day care. The policy is possible through tax laws making it hard to support a family on one salary, and by high subsidies to day care with no national support to home parents after parental leave. The official reasoning is that adults are happiest at work and children happiest in day care, to put it bluntly. Few of the seven Swedish political parties in parliament oppose this view, with the exception of the Christian Democrats.

2) The admired Swedish parental leave policy is very generous up until 16 months. But after that, caring for your child is more difficult in Sweden than in most other countries in the western world. The long Swedish parental leave is a necessity in high-tax Sweden. Without it, few Swedes could afford to take full care of their babies.



Swedish family policies during the last 30 years have resulted in insecure children and youth, stressed adults and lower quality parenthood. As security in children is a strong social legacy, it is a negative spiral.

Our children need more time with their parents – most parents also need more time with their children. This calls for a new view on family in Sweden. This calls for political action.

My name is Jonas Himmelstrand. What I just mentioned was a few of the

conclusions from my book *Following your heart – in the social utopia of Sweden* (in Swedish only) which is the reason why I am giving this talk today.

What I am about to say comes from the knowledge and experience of consulting Swedish businesses, public offices, schools and pre-schools during 25 years in the areas of management, education and psycho-social environment. It also comes from my family – my wife Tamara and our three children.

I am not politically or religiously engaged. The closest I have come to partisan politics was in my youth when I was engaged in the left-wing of SSU – The Swedish Socialdemocratic Youth Organisation.

I will use the word family, by which I mean all kinds of families: mother-father-child-families, single parent families and rainbow families. My reasoning is the same for them all.

My first awakening to this issue was about eight years ago when I taught coaching to teachers and school leaders at a high school in Sweden. The personnel was nearly in shock of the increasing psychological ill health among their students.

Then I heard mothers I met on business courses spontaneously express: "I felt so bad leaving my one year old (or two year old) in day care." I asked myself how much additional stress that feeling added.

Then I discovered how more and more young people were having difficulties managing my course in presentation skills with video feedback. They seemed to lack self-esteem.

At about the same time I heard more and more often at work places I visited: "Eva was such a wonderful and positive person. But soon, unfortunately, she suffered from emotional exhaustion and burnout."

These observations became the starting point of my book.

Sweden is perhaps the world's most secure country in terms of material wealth. We have among the most equal wages, very low levels of child poverty, lowest level of infant mortality and an admired equality between the sexes. Sweden ranks highly in these matters by international comparison.

Sure, everyone does not have the problems I will describe. But given our material resources we ought to be more healthy and happy than we are.

Which symptoms can we see and verify?

### Symptoms – lack of close relationships

- Increased psychological ill health among youth
- Increased stress related ill health among adults
- Increased behavioural problems among youth
- Plummeting educational results in schools
- High level of divorces
- Lower quality parenthood

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**Increased psychological ill health among youth.** Since 1989 Sweden has the worst development in this area of eleven comparable countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Spain, Wales and Scotland

according to a Swedish Government investigation (SOU 2006:77). Mostly girls.

**Increased stress related ill health among adults.** Stress and anxiety is the new Swedish national disease. The rates of sick leave in Sweden is among the highest in the world and a considerable domestic financial problem. Sick leave is especially high among Swedish women according to a study, also among highly educated women. Stress related disease is the most common form of sick leave in Sweden today.

**Increased behavioural problems among youth.** The Minister of Education in Sweden, Jan Björklund, asserts that "...Swedish schools has the highest level of truancy, destruction and most bad language in all the OECD countries." Björklund has been criticised for making too strong a statement. However, anyone visiting our schools and following the media can witness that the situation is bad enough. We see disruptions in the classroom, conformism, gangs, bullying, violence and criminality. Mostly boys.

**Plummeting educational results in schools.** The educational results in our schools have plummeted in the last 20 years. Sweden has lost its previous top position and is today only average among the highly developed nations.

**High level of divorces.** The number of divorces have increased from 10% to close to 50% in the last 40 years. One clear cause is an inability to handle close relationships.

**Lower quality parenthood.** A study from last year by Britta Johansson referred to in Svenska Dagbladet (a conservative national newspaper) show that even healthy, intelligent and reasonable Swedish parents have difficulties being parents today. They lack knowledge about children's needs and cannot set limits. She writes (my translation):


*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.*

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

Which are the possible mechanisms behind these problems?

**The mechanisms behind the problems:**

- **Small children need attachment – not education.**
- **Parents more important than peers also for older children.**
- **Good close relationships is the most important health factor.**
- **Parents do not understand the importance of parenthood.**



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**Lack of knowledge of the needs of small children.** The lack of knowledge in Sweden on the needs of small children is monumental. Scientists today agree that the groundwork for psychological health is laid in the first three years of life. The brain of the small child is physiologically formed by the psychological care of the closest carer. Lack of love and closeness during the first years in life leads to a chronically lowered anxiety threshold – as adults we become more easily stressed, afraid and anxious. Small children need love and sensitive caring from their parents or other close

adults. Small children do not need education or pedagogics. Love is their entire education. It is called attachment.

The research on day care in later years confirms the possible connection. A large exposure to care separated from parents or close relatives is associated with a small but significant increase in behavioural problems up until 12 years of age, even in those who went to the very best day care. This is not the fault of day care. The cause is more likely the separation from the child's closest attachment figures, the parents. Day care cannot replace parents even if some children are more resilient to day care than others.

A miniature Sweden was created when Quebec in Canada introduced collective day care according to the Swedish model. The effects were researched and the three researchers wrote the following:

*Finally, we uncover striking evidence that children are worse off in a variety of behavioral and health dimensions, ranging from aggression to motor-social skills to illness. Our analysis also suggests that the new childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.*

This is uncomfortably similar to the situation in Sweden.

**Lack of time with parents also for older children 4–18 years of age.** Also older children need time with their parents, an adult close to them who loves them.

When we are young we need someone to love us also when we do not seem to deserve it. Someone who stands steady in a storm. Someone who continuously gives the message: I am here for you, I love you, we can work this out together, we will manage this situation. Young people need their parents.

A day can be long in the life of a ten year old. Child care in school at 7.00 a.m. Already tired and hungry when school starts. A long day in school. Then child care in school again waiting for the tired parents to pick them up at perhaps 5.00 or 6.00 p.m. In the evening maybe another activity outside home. Where does the child find their emotional security? The parents are gone too long. One needs someone for comfort and closeness. In best case this will be an adult in school. But for most children this will be a peer or a gang offering emotional support during school hours – peer orientation. The problem with peer orientation is that peers, especially during the teens, do not have the maturity to handle more difficult feelings around differences, conflicts, failure, rejection and deceit. Therefore the peer group wins resulting in conformism, gangs, bullying and sometimes violence.

As nature wants to protect the relationship with those who the children attach to – nature had in mind that this should be the parents and other adults trusted by the parents – peer orientation leads to adults being emotionally rejected.

This results in parents feeling they have lost their teenager, and teachers who find that their pupils have less interest in learning. The teenager has attached to their peers because loving adults were not available for too long periods of time. A blind is leading a blind into the world of tomorrow. It is frighteningly similar to William Golding's novel, *The Lord of the Flies*.

Both parents and teachers witness to this phenomena. The adult world has lost the emotional connection to a young generation who is not yet mature enough to take responsibility for their life. Parents, and through them teachers and other mature adults, must regain their position as the emotionally most important people in their children's lives.

In Sweden we have had the belief that the State, through day care, pre-schools, schools and after-school care, can raise our children. But in spite of the enormous resources Sweden spends on these institutions, they cannot replace the parents. Parental attachment is the basis which these institutions need to at all be able to function in constructive ways.

**Good close relationships is the most important health factor.** According to a meta-study by Dr. Dean Ornish, high-quality close relationships is the superior health factor. In Sweden we don't have much time for close relationships. This leads to stress related ill health.

Too little control over one's personal life situation is another risk factor to health

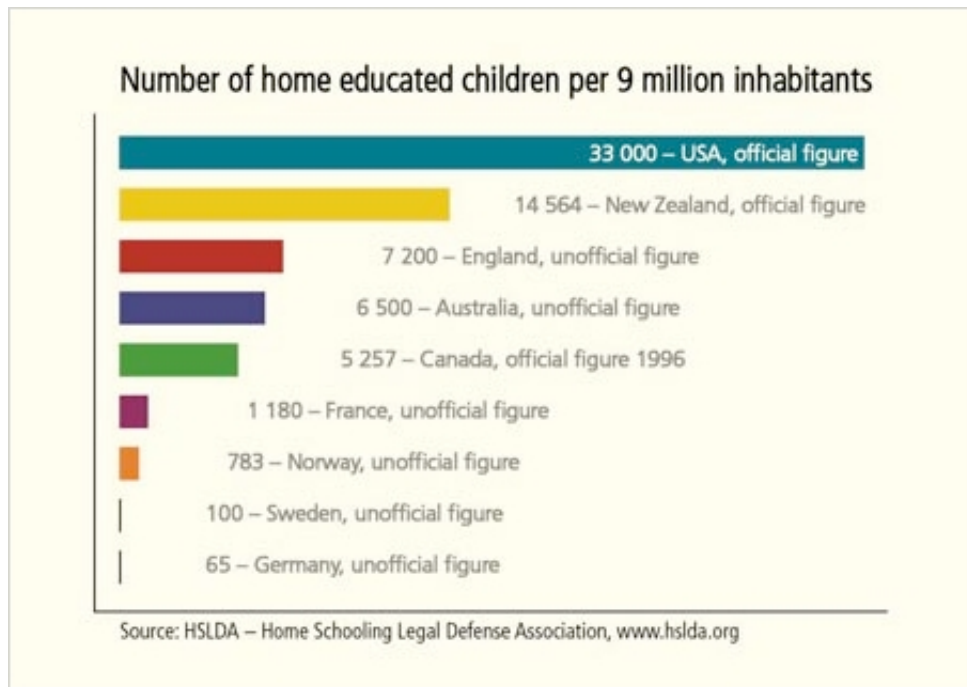
according to research by Sir Michael Marmot. Through its family policy Sweden has given the State a place in the bedroom of every Swedish family – a clear risk factor to health.

### **Parents do not understand the importance of the parental role.**

Unfortunately the Swedish Government has been too successful in its hidden message: "The State fosters children better than parents." This is probably the most destructive political message ever given in Sweden – at least in modern times.

## **A positive example – the international home schooling trend.**

Maybe the most fascinating example of a completely new view of family is the strong international home schooling trend. This means parents teaching their children rather than sending them to school. As can be seen in this diagram Sweden finishes last only surpassed by Germany with its embarrassing school legislation from 1938 still in effect.



Millions of children and adolescents are being taught at home in the western world today. This is the first really new pedagogical experiment done in 200 years. The research on home schooling is mind-blowing.

Untrained parents are more successful teaching their children than schools. Children seem to have better social development through home schooling than in school. Especially interesting is that parents with low education are better at educating their children than schools are. Why?

One probable reason is that adult attachment is a more important factor in learning than what educational science has realised. As children we want to fulfil the expectations of those we attach too. Parents have higher expectations than peers. Also home schooling has the advantage of being fully individualised and highly time effective.

A not particularly bold guess is that the dominance of pre-school and school will not survive knowledge society. Rather we will in the future see a considerable amount of education decentralised from the State and managed by parents in various ways.


It is an unfortunate sign of the view of families in Sweden that the Swedish Government lack understanding of home schooling. Through prejudice and lack of knowledge pioneering Swedish home schooling families are, in spite of home schooling being supported by law, chased with threats of the social authorities and fines in many, but not all, Swedish municipalities. Among western democracies only Germany treats their home schoolers worse than some local governments in Sweden.

## **Political goals – short term and long term**

I have been asked to present some possible political actions. Some of these suggestions are a little more long term than most, but I feel this is necessary for a clear direction.

### Political goals – short and long term

- **Parents need to be able to make their own decisions about early child care 0–3 years. Support to insecure parents.**
- **Quality proof attachment to every small child in child care outside of the family.**
- **Acknowledge the work done in families with children; financially, on the Curriculum Vitae and in pension funds.**
- **Make home schooling an easy option by law.**
- **Encourage people to make their own decisions, based on their own convictions, about their close relationships.**
- **Start a national educational programme about children's development – and the value of families.**



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**Parents need to be able to make their own choices about early child care 0-3 years.** Every choice needs to be possible for the majority of families – home parent, with parent at work, grandparent, neighbour, day care at work place, child minder or day care centre. In countries like Sweden where day care is highly subsidised, the same financial support needs to be given to the care of the parents choice. Insecure parents must be given support in their parental role rather than routinely recommended to send their children to day care.

**Quality proof attachment to every small child in child care outside the family.** Sweden needs to at least follow the American recommendations of maximum six one year olds to a minimum of two trained staff, and a maximum of eight two year olds to a minimum of two trained staff. Today Sweden has neither recommendations or rules. Group size for small children can be up to 17 and child-to-adult ratios average at 5:1 for all ages. When day care is given this kind of quality, parental care will not only be best for most children but also cheapest.

**Acknowledge the work done in families with children, financially, on the C.V. and in pension funds.** It must once again be possible for a family to live on one wage. Also the parent being at home needs to be recognised for the highly valuable work done when entering work life again.

**Make home schooling an easy option by law.** A healthy engaged parent with the time, energy and a reasonable strategy will in most cases make a better educational job than the institutions of society. The Swedish home schooling law needs to be interpreted liberally as in the majority of Anglo-Saxon countries today.

**Encourage people to make their own decisions, based on their own convictions, about their close relationships.** We need to put an end to the one-sided life style propaganda by the Swedish State. Human growth and creativity will flourish when people gain full control of one of the most important parts of their lives.

**Finally: Start a national educational programme on the new knowledge of children's development – and the value of families.** The industrial age is over and the knowledge society is here, we all need to know the new knowledge – some of which is quite old.

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For those interested: Two experts whose research and knowledge I have mentioned here – Professor Jay Belsky and Dr. Gordon Neufeld – will come to Stockholm, Sweden to be part of a seminar on June 3, 2009. The seminar is arranged by the

Swedish parental organisation Haro, [www.haro.se](http://www.haro.se). Dr. Gordon Neufeld will also give a seminar for school teachers on June 4, [www.stratletter.com](http://www.stratletter.com).

Of course, each of the facts I have presented can be questioned. But when you view them all together, as I have done in my book, it is much more difficult to escape the conclusion that the Swedish view of families has gone astray. Sweden needs a completely new view of families in the 21st century. Secure children and parents in the future requires more time for the close relationships than we have in Sweden today.

Families are the only remaining institutions for close relationships in Sweden today. They need to be protected from extinction and given support and care if this nation is to survive socially and emotionally.

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**Afterword:** Since this speech was given new information about home schooling has arrived from the US Government Department of Education. The number of home schooled children has continued to increase to 1,5 million in 2007. The numbers mentioned above therefore have to be revised: In the US there are 45 000 home schooled children/9 million inhabitants according to official sources, rather than the 33 000 given above. An official spokesperson said the figures are likely to keep rising.

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