

Assessment and follow-up of mental health at children advocacy centers / barnahus

Mia Myhre and Linn-Eirin Aronsen Haugen

Introduction

The Icelandic barnahus model has spread to all the Nordic countries and most of Europe. The purpose of this study was to get an overview of how mental health is assessed and followed up at children advocacy centers (CAC) / barnahus in order to encourage further development of best practice. The study aims to map practice based on published research, information available online, and through a descriptive survey distributed to European barnahus.

Methods

First, we performed a systematic literature review addressing the assessment and treatment of mental health in CACs. Second, questionnaire data including text answers from 27 barnahus in 10 countries were reviewed and summarized. Information about practice found online was used as a supplement. Further, data from 36 children included in a study from Barnehuset in Oslo (2016-2018) were available and may be used as examples on follow-up.

Results

The literature review resulted in ten original papers and three review articles, all from the USA. We found that there were differences in practice both between and within countries. The mental health of children was a priority in every barnahus, but few had an established procedure for evaluation. Everyone described assessment and follow-up as a voluntary offer. Many highlight the observation of forensic interviews as central to the assessment of the child's mental health, and that further assessment and follow-up were considered individually. Several described various instruments for evaluation; most often to measure trauma exposure and trauma symptoms. Many barnahus offered short-term treatment, but often just to a small proportion of all the children who come there.

Conclusions

This study has shown that there still is a great difference in practice between barnahus, even though both European and American (USA) standards have been developed. Differences in practices may be an opportunity for researchers to explore the efficacy and feasibility of different routines.