

Contact Families - A Swedish Achievement for Preventing Social Exclusion of Children in Vulnerable Life Situations

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The contact family is a special method for supporting children in families with social problems. The child receives an “extra family” with whom he or she can spend one or two weekends every month, one or two weekday nights and several holiday weeks during the year. The concept is that sharing this “extra family’s” everyday life helps the child to build up resiliency and become better able to handle everyday life in the biological family. The members of the contact family are role models and provide good examples of how to handle e.g. family and sibling conflicts. The child participates in social activities and develops a broader social network. Structure is given to everyday life in cases where it is missing. Sometimes the child finds “a significant other” in the contact family, i.e. an adult who understands the child’s needs, listens to the child’s thoughts and worries, and assists in evaluating the child’s cognitive abilities.

This form of social support is decided on and paid for by the Social Welfare Service in the community where the child lives with the biological family. The contact families are carefully chosen and receive regular supervision by social secretaries. The support can be given for a period of a few months up to several years.

My presentation describes the author’s research on children with contact families. The study concerns 50 children with contact families, living in four municipalities in Sweden (both large and small). It is a longitudinal study with a qualitative design consisting of a series of interviews with the children, the social workers, the biological parents, and the adults in the contact families, conducted over a period of six years. The presentation will describe and discuss the expectations of the different actors of what this support would mean and also how the outcome actually have become for the children and their biological families. The presentation will also place this form of support in the context of Swedish and international social welfare for children in vulnerable life situations.