



Learning from Nordic municipal social workers

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Summary

From 2015 onwards the Dutch child welfare system will be fully decentralized and reformed. Dutch municipalities will be responsible for the whole continuum of care for children, young people and families, including those with multiple problems. Therefore, these municipalities are looking for the most effective and efficient way of organizing child welfare services. This includes the implementation of local multidisciplinary social neighbourhood teams that consist of so-called youth and family generalists. These generalists are various kinds of professionals -from different organizations- that offer support to children, adolescents and families.

In order to support municipalities, the Netherlands Youth Institute examined the practice of municipal social work in four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. In these countries, municipalities are already responsible for all child welfare services. Our study focused on municipal social workers in these countries as they offer children, adolescents and families the necessary support.

This factsheet explains why the Nordic municipal social workers are key figures. It also focuses on their tasks and working conditions. And it sets out their six working principles:

1. seamless provision;
2. coordination of care;
3. the child is in the centre;
4. nothing is ever done without involving the parents;
5. inclusion of the social network;
6. focus on well-being and not merely on risks.

Practice in the Nordic countries

This factsheet outlines the main findings of a study by the Netherlands Youth Institute on the central position of municipal social workers in the Nordic countries. In this study we looked at:

- To what extent are municipal social workers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden so-called generalists?
- What can we in The Netherlands learn from these Nordic municipal social workers?

This factsheet is an abridged version of a Dutch brochure which summarizes the report about our study on Nordic municipal social workers.



The Nordic child welfare system

There is no such thing as the Nordic child welfare system. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden all organized their child welfare system in their own unique way. However, the common features of their child welfare systems influence how municipal social workers work.

*** Continuum of care**

In the Nordic countries, municipalities are responsible for the whole continuum of care, ranging from prevention to child protection. As such, municipal responsibilities include the social services; universal services like day care and schools; help & support for children, adolescents and parents, including after-care. In addition, municipalities are required to investigate all reported concerns about the well-being of children. This means that in the Nordic countries, the Dutch Child Care and Protection Board, Advice and Reporting Centres Child Abuse and Neglect and Youth Care Agencies are all part of one system under the umbrella of the local government.

*** Considerable autonomy within clear boundaries**

There is no entitlement to care in the Nordic countries. Rather, municipalities have the duty to provide certain services. This prevents great disparity between municipalities. However, as they are allowed to decide how to organize their child welfare services, Nordic municipalities do have a high degree of autonomy.

*** Transparency**

In the Nordic countries children, adolescents or parents in need of support have no cause to be confused about where to go. They just have to turn to the municipality. There thus is no wrong door. The bottom line is also clear: child abuse is not allowed in the Nordic countries. This is the result of mandatory reporting. All professionals working with children in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are required by law to report all their concerns about the well-being of children to the municipality.

Nordic social workers

Education and employer

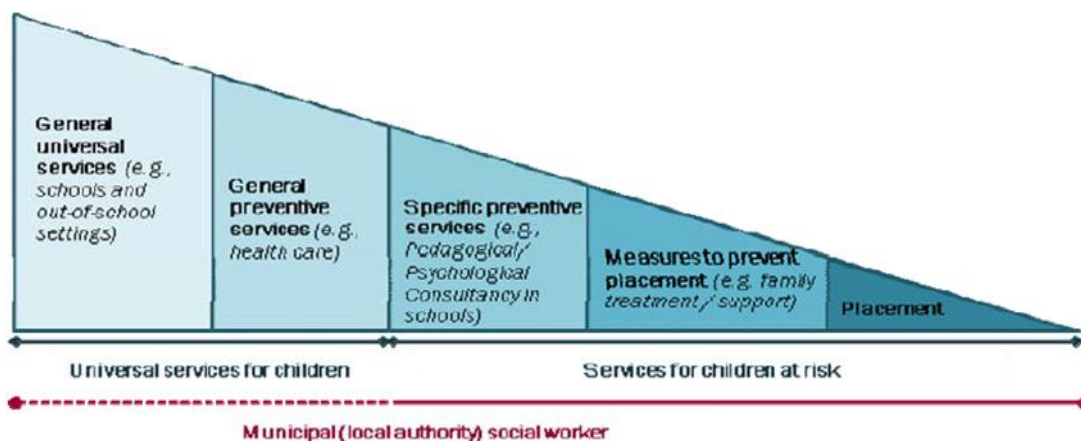
Social workers in all Nordic countries have a university degree, at least at bachelor's level. Social workers are often employed by the municipality.

Specialized in children, adolescents & families

Municipal social workers in the Nordic countries tend to be specialized. According to Meeuwisse et al. (2011) only one quarter of the municipal social workers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden work in so-called integrated way. The other 75 percent of them are specialized in a particular target group. More specifically, at least 40% of the social workers are specialized in the field of 'children, adolescents and families' (Meeuwisse et al., 2011). In addition, in our study the social workers also considered themselves to be specialists.

Responsible for all children

Within the domain children, adolescents and families, municipal social workers in the Nordic countries are responsible for the provision of services to all children. This not only includes children from so-called functional families, but also for children from families at risk. This can be observed from the following graph that Boddy et al. (2009) used to outline the Danish situation regarding parenting support, but that is also applicable to the other Nordic countries.



Municipal social workers in the Nordic countries can also be responsible for specific target groups or certain tasks regarding children, adolescents and families. This for example includes registering the biological father of children in Finland or advising the court regarding contact arrangements in Sweden.

Key figures

In short, Nordic municipal social workers thus are key figures in the local child welfare system. As can be seen from the earlier graph, they can work in various services for which municipalities are responsible. This ranges from universal services for children to services for children at risk.

Close by, but no general social teams

Nordic countries have a long tradition of offering social services as close as possible to their citizens. In some –larger- municipalities, these services are offered at the district or neighbourhood level. Within one building social workers meet children, adolescents and parents, assess their needs and sometimes also offer the necessary support.

Local multidisciplinary social neighbourhood teams that consist of so-called youth and family generalists -that are increasingly being implemented all over the Netherlands- seldom seem to exist in the Nordic countries. This could be explained by the fact that Nordic social workers are often employed by the municipality. In contrast, the Dutch youth and family generalists tend to be employed by different organisations.

Tasks

The tasks of municipal social workers in the Nordic countries are related to the whole continuum of care for which municipalities are responsible. Generally speaking, the larger the municipality, the more specialized the social workers.

Their tasks could include:

Preventive support from several universal services, such as day care centres, schools or family centres, for:

- children, adolescents and parents. This includes more collective services (such as parenting support or support groups) or more individualized services (such as counselling).
- professionals in these universal services. This for example includes support on how to detect or deal with school-related problems.

Intake

All professionals working with children in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are required by law to report their concerns about the well being of children to the municipality. When in need of support, children, adolescents and parents can also turn to the municipality themselves.

Assessment

In the Nordic countries, municipal social workers are required to investigate all these reports to determine if a child or adolescent is in need of support or protection. There are fixed legal time limits for this in the Nordic countries, ranging from one to two weeks. If the child is deemed to be in need of help or protection, municipal social workers have to make an assessment of the child's needs for interventions. There are also fixed legal time limits for this.

Organising support

After the assessment, the Nordic municipal social worker draws up a support plan, preferably together with the parents. The social worker also organizes the support for the child, adolescent or parents.

Support

Another Nordic municipal social worker offers the necessary support to the child, adolescent or parents. There are various support measures available, such as parenting support, a contact family, family therapy or placement of the child in out-of-home care.

Out-of-home care

Compared to The Netherlands, mandatory measures seem to be less common in the Nordic countries and voluntary measures more common. Social workers play a major role in this, for example by motivating parents to apply for a voluntary out-of-home placement of their child.

Follow-up

In most Nordic countries, the social worker that carried out the assessment also coordinates the provision of the support measures to children, adolescents and families. This social worker also conducts a follow-up with them and evaluates the support plan and/or the provided measures.

After-care

In Denmark and Finland, the provision of after-care is mandatory.

To what extent are municipal social workers in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden so-called generalists?

Just like the term youth and family generalist that is nowadays often used in The Netherlands, in the Nordic countries the term social worker seems to refer to a position and to a way of working. Often, the Nordic municipal social worker tends to be specialized, primarily in the domain of children, adolescents and families. Within this domain, social workers seem to work in a more generalist manner than their Dutch counterparts. As a key figure, the municipal social worker in the Nordic countries not only offers support to children, adolescents and families, but also to professionals in the universal services.

There are some similarities regarding the tasks of the Nordic municipal social worker and the Dutch youth and family generalist. For example, both types of professionals:

- adapt to the demands and work in a tailor-made manner together with the children, adolescents and families;
- support the development of a support plan, together with the client
- work to strengthen the parenting role and tasks.

When supporting families with multiple problems, both types of professionals also:

- strengthen connections with other fields of work or other domains of action (such as employment, debt relief or education);
- bring in specialized services;
- coordinate all support measures;
- take immediate action in case of a crisis situation.

An important difference between the Nordic municipal social worker and the Dutch youth and family generalist is that of the focus: the child or the family. More specifically, the social worker in the Nordic countries draws up –together with the parents- a plan that focuses and centres on the child. In contrast, the Dutch youth and family generalist supports the development of a so-called ‘one family’ plan, together with the family.

What can we in The Netherlands learn from these Nordic municipal social workers?

Based on our research, in the Nordic countries municipal social work seems to be embedded in a generally accepted vision on youth and families. In addition, there are six working principles when it comes to municipal social work with children, adolescents and families:

1. *Seamless provision*

In all four Nordic, there seems to be seamless provision in the domain of children, adolescents and families. For instance, in comparison to the Netherlands there is not such a great distinction in the support offered before and after the assessment of the children’s needs. This could be explained by the fact that in the Nordic countries all professionals have to report all their concerns about the well-being of children. And not just their concerns about child abuse. This enables offering support to children, adolescents and families when their problems are still quite small. In addition, as municipal social workers in the Nordic countries also work in the universal services, they can motivate children identified to be at risk to apply for more targeted or specialised services at the municipality.

2. *Coordination of care*

As discussed in the section on their tasks, the municipal social worker in the Nordic countries coordinates the provision of the support to children, adolescents and families.

3. *The child is in the centre*

The child is the central focus of the work of the Nordic municipal social worker that is specialized in children, adolescents and families. For instance, in all four Nordic countries, this social worker always talks with the child when making an assessment of its needs. This assessment is thus explicitly directed at the child and not at the family.

4. *Nothing is ever done without involving the parents*

In the Nordic countries, the municipal social worker always involves the parents. This not only happens when investigating reports on concerns about the well-being of a child, but also when drawing up a support plan.

5. *Inclusion of the social network*

Whenever possible, the municipal social worker in the Nordic countries tries to include the social network of the child, adolescent or family in the child's assessment. In addition, the social worker also involves the social network in providing support to the child, adolescent or family. If a social network is lacking, support groups can offer them the necessary support.

6. *Focus on well-being and not merely on risks*

While in Nordic countries the bottom line is that child abuse is never tolerated, the focus is on the well-being of children and not merely on risks. For example, the municipal social worker in these countries also offers support to all children, adolescents and families from universal services, like day care, schools and family centres.

Working conditions

Being a good social worker requires several working conditions according to the interviewed Nordic municipal social workers. These necessary working conditions include:

- Common instruments to fulfill their tasks: Municipal social workers in the Nordic countries often use common instruments. In Sweden this for example includes BBIC, which is a framework for assessment, planning and reviewing in child welfare.
- Continuous education as well as intervision and supervision
- The Nordic municipal social workers also stress the importance of a caseload that enables them to give their clients all the attention they need.

More information

This factsheet is an abridged version of a Dutch brochure called 'Wat valt te leren van de Scandinavische social worker? De praktijk van gedecentraliseerde jeugdhulp in Denemarken, Zweden, Noorwegen en Finland' (2013).

That Dutch brochure summarizes the report about our study on Nordic municipal social workers called 'Generalistisch werken rondom jeugd en gezin in de Scandinavische landen'.

These Dutch publications are a sequel to the report 'Jeugdzorg in Europa versie 2.0'. This report outlines the child welfare systems of Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Norway and Sweden.

These three Dutch publications can be obtained from the [Dutch website](#) of the Netherlands Youth Institute.

The article 'Child welfare in Europe' contains the conclusions of the report 'Jeugdzorg in Europa versie 2.0'. This article is available at the [English website](#) of the Netherlands Youth Institute ().

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