

No 1•00

# Children at Risk

The Swedish Special Group for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region



Focus on Finland: Initiatives to stop sex trade



## Dear friends around the Baltic Sea

In October 1999, I succeeded Maj-Inger Klingvall as Family Minister. When I was Minister for Health and Social Affairs during the mid-1990's, I participated in the decision to organise the 1996 World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. Now, four years later, I am pleased to take over and follow up the work that was started then. I am impressed by all that has been accomplished these past years and with the clear stand that decision-makers now take against exploitation of children.

A key success factor in disseminating information and knowledge to as many as possible is a co-ordinated approach. At a meeting in Stockholm 16-17 March with experts on children's issues from the region, there was unanimous consent to continue collaboration to establish the IT Child Centre network. This work needs widespread involvement. The Heads of Government of our countries at their Summit in Kolding 12-13 April, also expressed strong support for continued work with vulnerable children and for the Child Centre.

That much more needs to be done to prevent children at risk is evident in the interview with my Finnish colleague Eva Biaudet. She raises the fact that children, young girls and boys are being exploited in the border areas between Finland and Russia. She emphasises the importance of taking a strong position against such occurrences and informing people that this is, in fact, illegal even if it takes place on the other side of the border.

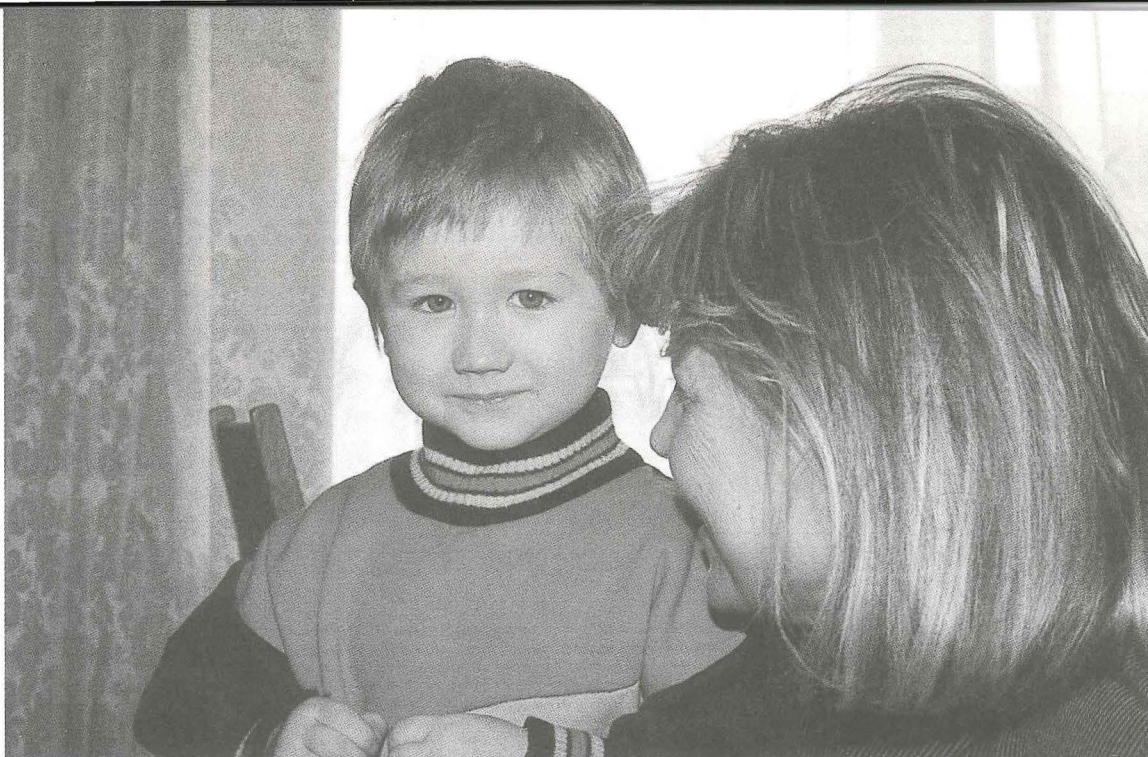
We are aware that many children and young people are being sexually exploited. However, there is little knowledge of the numbers involved. ECPAT Sweden has therefore taken the initiative to a survey to try to determine the number of children sexually exploited in Sweden. Similar studies are also under way in other countries.

While it is important to improve legislation to prevent crimes, we must also develop methods to assist those children who are victims of sexual exploitation. In this issue, you can read how Save the Children Sweden at their clinic helps boys who have been subjected to sexual exploitation. The results show that unless these boys receive help there is a real risk that they themselves later in life will commit offences against children.

I hope this issue of Children at Risk will inspire us in our important work for the children in our region.



Ingela Thalén  
Family Minister



## Successful results at centre in St Petersburg

The St Petersburg Centre for Rehabilitation of Children and Youth in 1999 received more than 500 children at risk, street children, abused children and young mothers. "Of the 535 persons whom we assisted, only 16 returned after leaving our Centre," says Director Vladimir Borisov.

The Centre assists children 3-18 years of age and provides residential care, day care activities, continued social services and assistance for children who have left the Centre and assistance to foster families.

"As a public institution, we receive funding from the St Petersburg budget," Director Borisov explains. "Since the budgetary funding is insufficient to meet all needs we also seek support from other sources. Unicef, for example, allocated USD 15,000 for a project to assist teenage mothers and we have also received funding to help children reunite with their parents. Within that framework, we will establish an information centre about children and their situation in the St Petersburg area.

Director Borisov personally meets all children and listens to the troubling accounts of their ordeal. Asked to relate one case that particularly comes to mind, he answers that all children and

their predicament deserve attention. However, one case has, over the past years, required particular attention:

"A boy of five came to us from war-torn Chechnya. Some journalists helped the boy and his two younger brothers to St Petersburg after they had lost all relatives. His brothers found new homes in other cities but the boy remained. No one was interested in adopting him. We received no help from the St Petersburg authorities since the boy was not registered with them. No one was willing to assist the boy. Thus, we were forced to act since we could not send him back alone to Chechnya.



After three years of court proceedings, we secured citizenship rights for him and social security. He is still with us," says Vladimir Borisov and adds that in this work it is both natural and necessary to be personally involved.

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The Swedish Special Group for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region was established after the Conference in Tallinn on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Baltic Sea Region 1998 by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in Sweden. The Working Group's mandate is to serve as information centre for children at risk and to pursue follow-up activities of the Conference in Tallinn within the social area.

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In our therapy room, the boy draws himself armed with a submachine gun. He fires a set of shots against a man being executed in the electric chair. The remarkable aspect of this drawing, apart from the double acts of violence, is that the boy depicts himself twice as large as the person he assassinates. The man being killed is his foster father who has committed serious acts of sexual abuse against the eight-year-old boy.

# Treating victims of sexual abuse

Why did the boy depict himself as large and the offender as small? He had led a difficult life. Only five days old he was taken into care because of his parents' abuse. The criminal father had died of alcohol abuse. The mother was a drug addict. During his eight year long life, he had moved from one family to another between spells with his biological mother.

When therapy started, the boy was rowdy at school and hit other children. In therapy he was unable to play simply because he could not bear to loose. During therapy all his activities centred on being big, strong and armed to kill the weaker.

After all his traumatic experiences, the boy's only way of surviving was to deny fear and feelings of vulnerability. His only protection from the dangerous outside world was guns and grenades. In these acts of violence and self-destructive adventures, he repeats the violence and frightening experiences he had been exposed to.

I was concerned: Reports from school indicated that he resolved conflicts through violence. Would his violent behaviour increase or would his self-destructiveness lead him into death or serious injury?

The treatment model we follow at the Swedish Save the Children Boy's Clinic follows four major areas:

- Describing abuse
- Expressing emotion
- Refusal
- Acceptance.

These themes are by no means exclusively practised at our clinic. However, consciously dividing psychotherapeutic work into different themes allows us to focus more clearly on the sexual abuse these children have been victims of.

To describe abuse is to make reality real. One of the greatest obstacles for children in relating their experience is that these are associated with secrecy, shame and guilt. Children often blame themselves. A child's most basic defence

against threat is to shut his or her eyes. In a psychologically overpowering situation, dissociation is a crucial defence mechanism. When the therapist tries to speak with the child about the abuse, it is not uncommon that he or she yawns, slides off the chair, stares at the ceiling, becomes difficult to reach and looks tormented. As a therapist it is equally difficult to speak in detail about sexual abuse. Yet it is necessary in order to help the child emotionally relate to the abuse, a prerequisite for dealing with the experiences.

The cornerstone in our treatment is to help children describe and emotionally express their feelings towards the abuse they have been victims of. We have a well-equipped playroom with boxing gloves, swords, mattresses that can be folded, dangerous and kind soft animals, pillows, clothes, games, dolls and drawing material. We also have a St Bernard-sized dog and a giant snake. These articles help children express feelings and play out situations that they consider important. As a rule the child has mixed feelings towards the perpetrator, especially if that person is a parent or someone they know well. In a child's world, the offender can be two different persons: one they like and long for and another that frightens them. There is a risk that the therapist adopts the single view of the offender as evil. The child is then left alone with – and not permitted to express – his or her positive feelings towards the offender. The emotion most difficult to deal with is guilt and shame. The child has been forced to satisfy the needs of an adult and not, as normal, vice versa. Not being unconditionally loved gives rise to shame. The child feels different and inferior to others. There are no short cuts in dealing with shame. The therapeutic answer lies in an extended and reliable contact in which dependability is more important than content. There is a major risk that

the child loses confidence in the therapist if he or she too early in the treatment actively repudiates the child's own perception as worthless.

A sexually abused child has per definition violated boundaries both physically and mentally. The ability to set limits and to refuse has been damaged. This is evident in how the child relates towards others. Some children react to shame by being shameless, sexually expressive and sexually obtrusive towards other children and adults in ways that are considered offensive. Other children develop a narcissitic disorder, compensate inferiority by being cruel and violent towards others or become overly reclusive. These children often need help in understand normal social limits and norms.

Reconciliation is a prerequisite for leaving serious abuses behind and going on to develop in life. In order for a sexually abused child to act normally, both emotionally and behaviourally and not remain a victim, the child and those close to him or her must accept that full retribution is unattainable. Most perpetrators are neither prosecuted nor tried for their crimes. It is obviously a boost for the victim and for rehabilitation if the perpetrator is apprehended and sentenced. Yet neither a guilty verdict nor damages for the victim can help reverse the crime itself. To accept and come to grips with the fact that I, as a child, have been sexually abused is necessary in

order to move on in life.

The child needs support in order to accept that he or she is, in fact, normal in spite of the unusual and extraordinary events that have taken place. It is important that he or she is given the opportunity to play with other children, go swimming, biking and camping on the same terms as others.

An important aspect of acceptance to give room for feelings of sadness and sorrow over the fact that all things should have turned out differently. The child that has been abused by a biological father longs for the "kind" father.

Let me return to the 8-year old, the boy who wished he was bigger. He often turned up for therapy with fresh scars from dangerous play or fights. I asked about his wounds; did they hurt, should I get a band-aid? I emphasised how concerned I was for his well being and asked him to be careful. I repeated my concern several times and asked him whether he was in pain. The boy repudiated my concern and called it ridiculous. It did not hurt at all, he said, while arming himself with swords

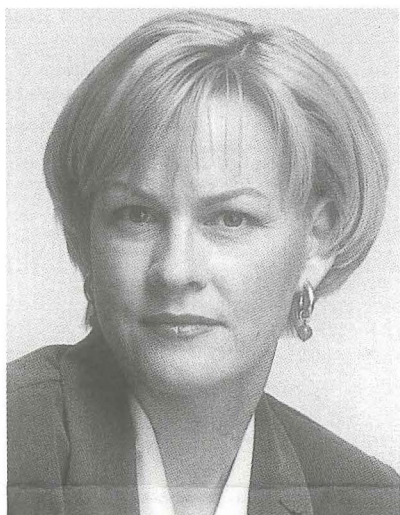
Continued on page 6

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When Eva Biaudet, Finland's Minister of Health and Social Services, heard alarming reports of commercial sexual abuse by Finns in areas bordering to Russian Karelia, she immediately took forceful action. "We knew minors were being abused in places such as Thailand but we had never imagined it could occur here as well," Ms. Biaudet says.

# Minister takes action against sex trade



To emphasise the seriousness of the problem, she travelled with the Interior Minister to the Russian border towns and invited Finnish media to join them. "It was important that media help spread the message that such conduct is illegal also across the border. Most of these men are

not paedophiles or lunatics but perfectly normal men who probably think that they are beyond the reach of social and legal restraints." There is, however, unquestionably also an element of racism among these men who consider the Russian children they abuse as inferior, she notes.

The action was successful and bilateral agreements on law enforcement cooperation as well as cooperation in social issues were established. "It is important to find long-term solutions in child-related social issues. We would like to share and exchange knowledge with our Russian neighbours."

The root of the problem is growing poverty in Russia and the enormous economic gap between the two countries. Neither Finland nor the other Nordic countries can establish a

social security system in Russia. That is Russia's sovereign responsibility. "We should, however, strengthen our efforts to assist Russia. Contacts at the highest political levels are not enough; we must work at the grass-roots level with new ideas on organising social work."

Finland has recently adopted an Agenda for Action in accordance with its commitments at the Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm 1996. "It is now up to organisations and NGO's in Finland to implement the Agenda. We could, for example, follow the Swedish example and reach agreements with travel operators to guarantee child sex free hotels. "For families the very idea of staying at a hotel where child prostitution takes place is highly unpleasant."

Eva Biaudet, 39 years, has been Finland's Minister of Health and Social Services since 15 April 1999. She has been a Member of Parliament since 1991 and was Vice-Chairman of the parliamentary Committee of Foreign Affairs 1995-1999. She devotes her spare time to her three children.

## Young perpetrators of sexual abuse

Research indicates that as many as 30 percent of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are under the age of 18.

There is also an increasing amount of knowledge around adult perpetrators, which indicates that as many as half committed their first offence before the age of 18.

Research also indicates that among perpetrators of child sexual abuse as many as half were sexually abused as children. These data imply that the step from being a victim of child sexual abuse to becoming a perpetrator may indeed be very short.

Preventive work where young people are targeted must therefore be built on knowledge about young perpetrators and what they need in order to be re-integrated in society.

Research in the field of child sexual abuse shows that in 46 percent of the cases of child sexual abuse, abuse is repetitive which is why preventing repetition of abuse is an important way of preventing children from experiencing abuse.

Rehabilitating young persons who have already committed sexual abuse - tertiary prevention - aims to prevent repetition of abuse.

As a preventive effort, develop-

ing knowledge about young perpetrators is urgently needed. Save the Children Alliance Europe has therefore started a project, that has received financial support from the European Commission under the Daphne Initiative, with participants from Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Spain and Sweden.

Very little work has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention programmes and many countries have no such programmes at all. Save the Children will therefore evaluate prevention tools and methodologies and develop prevention programmes.

Save the Children in Denmark,

Finland, Greece, Iceland, Romania, Spain and Sweden are now participating in developing and evaluating preventative work. Each organisation has a different approach and target group.

A prevention seminar is planned for 7-10 September 2000 in Helsingör, Denmark. The meeting will operate on two levels, a meeting of "experts" on prevention to look at and develop criteria for evaluation of prevention programmes and secondly as support to national Save the Children agencies that wish to begin prevention work.

Lapsen seksuaali  
hyväksikäyttö on



Pelastakaa L



# STOP-programme to combat trafficking

During the past two years, the European Union, through its STOP-fund, has financed the establishment of a network between authorities in Estonia, Finland, Germany, Russia and Sweden to monitor, analyse and combat trafficking in women and children. The collaboration between authorities will now be extended to effectively stop the presence of minors in the sex trade. In this endeavour Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany and Norway have joined forces.

This Finnish-based STOP-project will focus on:

- Research and investigation on minors in prostitution and their buyers. Each partner country will gather information. The use of the Internet in internationally advertising prostitution of minors will also be examined.
- Development of police work and prosecution methods. Information and know-how exchange between authorities to safeguard victims of the sex

trade in and from the newly independent countries. New methods for pre-investigation of the abuse of minors in the sex trade will be developed. While protecting victims, investigation and prosecution of abusers must at the same time be intensified.

Police, border guards, prosecutors and others will meet for training sessions during 2000 in Tallinn, Helsinki and St. Petersburg.

- Implementation of new legislation. Last year, Denmark, Finland and Sweden amended legislation to prevent the pur-

chase of sex from minors, both nationally and internationally.

Unfortunately, these measures have not been sufficient to stop the trade and enforcement must be intensified. The project will seek to enhance co-operation between authorities across the borders as well as training programmes for police and prosecution officers.

- Intensified public prosecutions of offenders.
- Dissemination of Information on legislation in clients' countries of origin. Knowledge of the amended paragraphs to Nordic legislation concerning buying of sex from minors is still limited.
- Information and education directed towards schools and police officers to combat prostitution of minors.

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set - Rädda Barnen

When crossing the border to Russia Finnish tourists receive this leaflet.

## Stopping offences at the border

Tourists passing customs officials at the Finnish border crossing towards the Russian town of Sortavala not only receive their passport but also a leaflet from Pelastakaa Lapset, Save the Children. The cover reads "Every child has the right to the joys of childhood" and explains that the Finnish law prohibiting the purchase of sex from minors is applicable in other countries as well.

Save the Children Finland started the project all along the Finland-Russia border although the problem is greatest in the cities Sortavala and Vyborg. "The target for our action is Finnish men," explains Secretary General Juha Eskelinen. "Most of these are not paedophiles but simply drunken men out to buy sex. The area has been called 'the poor man's Thailand'."

Save the Children recognise that poverty is at the roots of the

problem. Drug abuse among children and youth has reached catastrophic levels and the health situation continues to deteriorate.

"Long term, we must support Russian communities in establishing child support structures. What is needed is sustainable solutions rather than humanitarian assistance projects."

Institutional care is, for example, reasonably satisfactory but it is necessary to focus on supporting families. "This is not only a

question of funds but of transferring know-how in dealing with social problems."

Juha Eskelinen underlines that while combating commercial sexual exploitation of minors it is important not to undermine the normal perfectly legitimate tourist trade in these areas. "People in these border regions are dependent on the tourism trade and we are not out to condemn Finns in general."

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Secretary General, Juha Eskelinen, Save the children, Finland.



# Latvian ISP establishes hotline

The international conference on combating child pornography on the Internet, held last autumn in Vienna, emphasised the need to further strengthen partnerships at national and international levels among governments, the Internet industry, hotlines and NGOs.

Legal regulation by governments must be complemented by self-regulation of the Internet Service Providers (ISPs), the conference concluded. "Law enforcement can only be successful with the strong support of ISPs and from hotlines." The conference, co-

sponsored by the Austrian and U.S. governments with European Union support, was attended by many nations, including Latvia. Following the conference, the Latvian government immediately started discussions with leading ISPs. "The Ministries of Interior, Justice and Welfare as well as NGOs and Unicef discussed their responsibilities for child protection against illegal information, violence and racism," says Inete Ielite, Director of the National Centre for the Rights of the Child.

As an outcome of these discussions, the leading Latvian ISP, Delfi, took measures to combat child pornography. Director Einars Bindemanis says that although ISPs generally cannot be held accountable for sexual or other content transferred or stored in

their network "we recognise the importance of the ISP in stopping distribution of pornography and other abusive content if this potentially can be harmful to children or others." If asked by law enforcement agencies to close down sites or to reveal owners of sites, Delfi always provides full cooperation. A clause in their customer agreements prohibits customers from storing pornographic or other questionable contents on their sites. If revealed, the ISP can therefore close the site.

Mr Bindemanis feels, however, that monitoring sites and judging the necessity to close them, cannot be the prime responsibility of the ISP. "We cannot order the closure since that is a legal question which involves freedom of speech issues. As such, it must be addressed by the police authorities or other government bodies." The agreed solution was that Delfi establish a 24 hour Internet sexual abuse helpline open to all to report controversial websites

on Latvian networks. "We pass the information on to the police and responsible institutions or decide ourselves to shut down the site." The ISP is also working on a solution for filtered access to Internet for customers who want to restrict access for their children.



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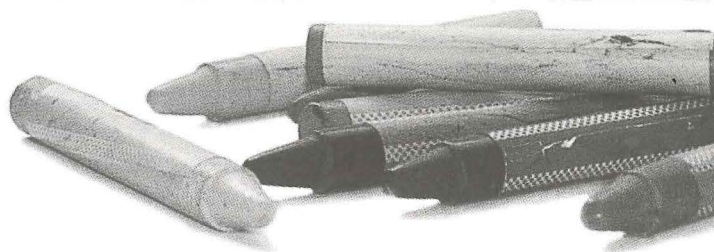


## Package paedophile tours from Denmark

Save the Children Denmark recently announced it had firm independent evidence of organised package paedophile tours from Denmark to Poland and the Baltic countries with flights, accommodation and children included.

"We are convinced that the information we have received is true since it has been given by several independent sources," General Secretary Laue Traberg Smith told Danish media.

Following the alarming reports, the issue was raised in the Danish parliament with Foreign Minister, Niels Helveg Petersen. The Minister declared he would "take the opportunity at the Baltic Sea States Summit to point out the responsibility each country has towards its most vulnerable groups." "The countries around the Baltic Sea, including those that have major economic and social problems, must make a determined effort to solve this problem," he added.



### Treating victims... continued

to maim defenceless animals.

Why was I so adamant in showing concern? I wanted to see if my overprotective approach could induce him to regress, to gain the ability to become a small child and actually accept the need for adult support. The offender had admitted his crimes and was serving a long prison sentence. I was highly sceptical whether the boy would feel safe and secure in the institution where he had been placed. I was, to my great joy, wrong. The boy built good relations with the staff, did well in school and received help in establishing contact with his mother who was undergoing compulsory care for her substance abuse.

One day in the therapy room the boy no longer wished to arm himself. He want to play hide-and-seek and over the months he

repeatedly wanted to play the game. That was a breakthrough. He had started being young all over again and started gaining a certain measure of trust in relation to adults. His view of the parents could slowly evolve from one of perfection to a more balanced view. He had believed his father had died by mistake while accidentally drinking alcohol and that his mother had problems with nicotine. He started to "see" and think about the drink and drug problems. His feeling towards the offender also became more balanced. He was filled with hatred and rage but could let feelings of fear and even a slight sympathy towards the offender emerge.

The text is an abstract from a publication that will be available in English shortly.

## Summit supports work

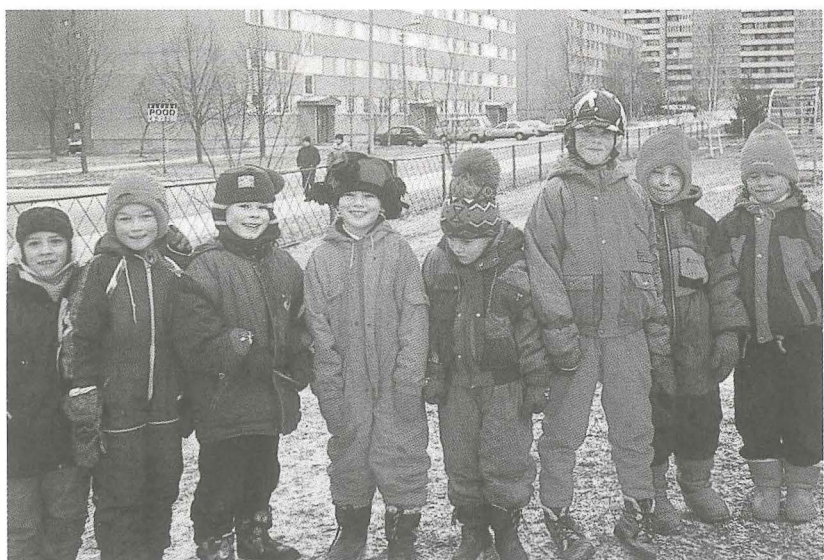
At the Baltic Sea States Summit, held in Kolding 12-13 April, the Heads of Government and representatives from the eleven countries agreed to intensify efforts to enforce a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach towards children at risk in the area. They also agreed to support the development the Child Centre for Children at Risk IT network. The gathered leaders further emphasised the need to promote co-operation between NGOs and authorities involved in children's issues.

The children's issues are presently coordinated by the Special Swedish Group that, from time to time, has reported to the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and its Committee of Senior Officials.

"The CBSS has, for a long time, been involved in supporting work for children at risk," says Jacek Starosciak, Director of the CBSS Secretariat. Following the strong support expressed at the Kolding summit, we are looking at the possibilities of further integrating this important work into CBSS."



# Tartu Centre trains volunteers



Tartu children stop to say hello on their way to school.

The Tartu Support Centre for Abused Children, one of two centres in Estonia, was the first in the country to focus on abused and neglected children when it was established five years ago.

"In our daily work at the Centre we use an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to the problems," Lemme Haldre explains. "Our team consists of a

social worker, a practitioner, a psychologist, a police officer, a lawyer and a pedagogue. We set out bearing in mind that each family has a child level, a parent level and a couple relationship level. Between these levels there are boundaries, specific rules and rights that have to be taken into consideration. The aim of our Centre is to provide the abuse victims with professional help as well as to carry out preventive

work, in order to stop violence repetition in the next generation and in new households."

The Centre provides abused children and their families with psychosocial and medical counselling and treatment. It also organises training courses for specialists involved in the work with children; helps raise public awareness about abused children and develop a network of professionals in the child protection field. From 10 in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon the Centre receives visitors by appointment. Then, until 7 p.m., the Centre is open without prior appointment.

"The main causes which induce mothers to seek help from the Centre are problems concerning their children", says Lemme Haldre. "In nearly one-fourth of the cases it becomes evident that the actual roots are domestic violence and many families have experienced years of violent relationships."

Some of activities are pensioners who visit the Centre to sew and

read with children. Students from the School of Social Work in Tartu are taken on to support children and young people. The Centre selects, trains and supervises these volunteers. After the first year the volunteers are expected uphold the relation without support. The children, their parents and the volunteers are satisfied with this arrangement.

The Tartu Support Centre for Abused Children was funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs until 1997 when the Soros Foundation assumed financial responsibility. That funding has now been discontinued and the financial situation is uncertain.

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## ECPAT surveys problem

Information on the nature and extent of young people's involvement in prostitution, pornography and trafficking in Sweden is very limited.

Following reports pointing towards organised forms of child sex trade in Sweden, ECPAT Sweden has therefore decided to undertake a study. The inquiry is a first attempt at quantifying the extent of the problem. It is also a first step toward filling the knowledge gap on the national situation.

ECPAT Switzerland as well as ECPAT Australia have carried out similar projects in 1998, showing that a significant number of children are involved in commercial sexual exploitation or can be considered "at risk".

The ECPAT study will consist of the following three components:

- A literature review and analysis of earlier research, studies

and reports addressing the issue.

- A national survey of the knowledge, experience and expertise of experts, organisations and authorities who work in close contact with children. A questionnaire will be used to gather the information in this part.
- Fieldwork leading to interviews with targeted children and adults who are or have been involved in commercial sexual exploitation.



## Nordic programme for social workers

The Nordic Educational Programme in Social Work – NOPUS – which brought together social workers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, has now been concluded. The programme offered social workers insights and training in dealing with children at risk and their families.

The first one-week stage of the programme took place in Junnala, Latvia, where participants studied different legislation regarding the children's rights to social welfare. "We discussed many aspects and methods of social work and referred extensively to the Convention of the Rights of the Child", says Sarmite Krumina, a social worker from Latvia. "We were eager to learn as much as possible and to effectively absorb the new knowledge."

The second stage, dedicated to the needs of children, was

held in Vilnius. The Vilnius programme focused on children at risk and statistics. Participants presented projects from their countries and underlined the need for consistent teamwork and coordination in order to reach success. The final stage, held in Tallinn, concerned social work with children at risk and their families.

The programme not only provided plenty of knowledge, but gave us a unique opportunity to re-charge batteries and find new colleague friends," says Sarmite Krumina.



Children and Trauma  
22-24 May 2000,  
Linköping, Sweden  
Organiser: The Nordic  
Society for Prevention of  
Child Abuse and Neglect

Terve-SOS 2000 – The  
Millennium for Children and  
Young People  
22-24 May 2000  
Tampere, Finland  
Organiser: STAKES,  
Finland

"Minors in the Sex Trade"-  
Network Between the  
Authorities of Russia, Estonia,  
the Nordic countries and  
Germany  
Tallinn, Estonia,  
13 June, 2000  
Organiser: STAKES  
STOP 2-project conference

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation  
of Children: A Health and  
Criminal Justice Perspective  
18-24 June 2000,  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
Organiser: The British  
Council

## "We must share experiences"

The planned Child Centre for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region is now taking shape. On behalf of the eleven countries in the Council of the Baltic Sea States, Bragi Gudbrandson, General Director of the Government of Iceland Agency for Child Protection, elaborates on the benefits of establishing the network.

"We have a great deal of knowledge about developments in the field of child abuse, protection and rehabilitation and new knowledge is constantly emerging. It is therefore of extreme importance that we share educational programmes with each other. I would like to see the Baltic Sea countries working together in a new educational venture".

Bragi Gudbrandson points towards the Icelandic experience in establishing the multi-disciplinary Children's Home (see Children at Risk 2/99) and hopes the Homes serve as a model of particular value to other countries. "Just as this concept was introduced to us from the United States, we would like to be of assistance to other countries," he says. "Our experience is that the multidisciplinary approach is an efficient way of assisting abused children."

The Child Centre IT-network will open a facility for consultation between individual professionals. "There are cases that are extraordinary, rare and difficult to handle. We had, for example, a case when the



Bragi Gudbrandson

parents were convinced that the child was the victim of abuse but we, as professionals, could not see any signs of abuse. In cases such as these we can

benefit from professional interaction."

The Centre also provides oppor-

tunities to discuss and disseminate information on general measures in, for example, prevention, policy-making and policy. "Usually, whenever we read guidelines more questions arise than are answered. The IT-network will enable us to delve deeper into the precise interpretation of legislation and guidelines. For many professionals it is simply not enough simply to read research; we need to discuss the findings."

Bragi Gudbrandson emphasises that these are by no means the only benefits of the network. The Child Centre will take time to develop. "We cannot foresee exactly how it will be shaped since the Child Centre will continuously develop and change."



Officials from the eleven Baltic Sea countries met in Stockholm to finalise plans for the Child Centre.

## Building a virtual child center

The multidisciplinary virtual Child Centre for Children at Risk in the Baltic Sea Region is now rapidly advancing.

In March, representatives of the involved countries met in Stockholm to discuss the further development. Steps are now being taken to:

- create a network of existing multidisciplinary centres in the region to develop and to co-ordinate competence, education and consultation;
- identify a network of "contact persons" or "administrators" for each country;
- develop a virtual meeting place/room for NGOs;

The Child Centre is to help create a network of the existing regional multidisciplinary centres in Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and the Russian Federation. They will both provide and co-ordinate information and expertise on abuse and sexual exploitation of children and will, at the same time, make use of the various services provided by the Centre. In future, teleconferencing facilities for use in consultation and education will be possible.

The officials all emphasised the need for openness. Information must obviously be protected against unauthorised access to allow consultation between

specialists but the very existence of the network should not be shrouded in secrecy. They therefore underlined the need for public access to non-confidential information. NGO participation is another vital aspect that must be considered in establishing and operating the network.

"This year, we have had many contacts with NGOs and they have shown great enthusiasm," Ingrid Åkerman reports. "They recognise the immediate benefits of the network in becoming more visible, finding each other and providing a vehicle for securing funding."

At this stage, participants have agreed that the website

initially should contain regularly updated information and facilitate group discussions. A main web administrator would be responsible for updating information. The present site will continue to be located and administered by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

Taking the project yet another step further would involve providing comprehensive information that is updated on a daily basis. Child centres would be provided with a facility to carry out discussions with invited experts such as police and prosecutors under secure forms while that information would be inaccessible to others.