

3

To Be Summoned to Barnahus: Children's Perspectives

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Introduction

This chapter explores children's perspectives on the institution of Barnahus and being summoned to a Barnahus in Sweden. The starting point for the chapter is a child's right to express their views and to be heard in all matters affecting them (cf. Alderson 2010; Barnombudsmannen 2007; Röbbäck and Höjer 2009). Like adults, children have concerns and strategies of their own to help them cope with situations, which are important to identify and recognise (Brannen et al. 2000; Dencik and Jørgensen Schultz 1999; Qvortrup 1999; Lansdown 2010). In order to understand the world from children's point of view, researchers, as well as professionals

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working in child welfare, need to be invited into children's life worlds and listen to how children explain and understand their experiences (Bell 2002; Olsson 2010; Sandbæk 1999). To capture children's understanding of Barnahus and of being summoned to Barnahus, we have interviewed children who have had these experiences and we have listened to and explored their narratives about being summoned to and visiting a Barnahus. Researchers have referred to this approach as research *with* children, rather than research about children (cf. Christensen and James 2008; Powell and Smith 2009). The children's narratives will be analysed, and in line with Bateson (1998), we will look for patterns, but also unique examples in the interviews, in order to capture participating children's understanding of Barnahus and of the emerging interaction, as well as why they were summoned to Barnahus.

The data that inform this chapter originate from an empirical study entitled 'Children in Barnahus: an interdisciplinary study into child perspectives'. The main study is a comprehensive systemic and dialogical participatory action research project (Olsson 2014a, b) approved by the Regional Ethics Board in Lund (dnr 2011/756; dnr 2014/84). A key focus in the project is exploring in dialogical interplay the meaning of the concept 'child perspectives' in use in the context of Barnahus and how the meaning is co-constructed (cf. Anderson 1999; Holland 2009; Olsson 2010; Shotter 2009). In this chapter, however, the aim is to make children's own voices heard, capturing 'children's perspectives' about being summoned to, arriving at and visiting Barnahus. The concept 'children's perspectives' is here used in the meaning of representing the voices of children, as *distinguished* from 'child perspectives' which here is used as an adult focus on the understanding that children have of experiences and actions (Halldén 2003; Sommer et al. 2011). The analysis is thus focused on the former, and on the children as acting subjects in their own life world, and making their voices heard.

Routines in Swedish Barnahus

A key purpose of Barnahus in Sweden is to improve the investigations and the collaboration of agencies involved in protecting children who might be victims of crimes of violence and abuse (Landberg and Svedin 2013).

Children are summoned to Barnahus for the purpose of a criminal investigation and to find out if they are in need of protection, and if so, to provide immediate support (Swedish National Police Board 2009). The collaborating agencies (police, public prosecution, forensic medicine, paediatrics, child psychiatry and child welfare services) are expected to put the children's rights into practice (Swedish National Police Board 2008; Johansson 2012; Rasmusson 2011).

A key question in the chapter is how children understand the meaning of the Barnahus institution. As a background to the children's statements, we briefly explain how a day at Barnahus is organised.

Arriving at Barnahus, the child and the accompanying person(s) are directed to a waiting room. The child investigative interview with the police takes place in a separate room with video cameras connected to a computer or TV screen in the co-hearing room. In this room, the prosecutor and the special representative for children are watching. With consideration of the child's perspectives and to be able to coordinate parallel ongoing investigations—criminal, social and medical—the prosecutor can decide to give the child welfare caseworker, a paediatrician and/or somebody from the child psychiatry services the right to be present in the co-hearing room (Swedish Prosecution Authority 2016). The objective of a joint interview is to protect children from unnecessarily telling their stories repeatedly to different persons in different places (Rasmusson 2011). After the interview, the child returns to the waiting room where accompanying persons (see below) are waiting. When the child welfare caseworkers decide that the child does not need immediate protection or support, the child leaves the Barnahus with their accompanying person(s). Otherwise, the children have to stay in the waiting room, while child welfare caseworkers take the necessary measures to protect and provide further support to the children.

Children visiting Barnahus are often accompanied by their parents (Kaldal et al. 2010); however, in cases where a custodian or someone with whom the custodian has a close relationship, is suspected of the crime, the child will be summoned to Barnahus without the knowledge or consent of the custodians (usually the parents, so henceforth in the chapter custodians are called parents). District courts can decide to temporarily remove and transfer custody rights to a special

representative for children ('särskild företrädare', see Chap. 11 for further information about the special representative), usually a lawyer, who has the right to decide how the child should be summoned and about the child's participation in the interviews (Swedish Prosecution Authority 2016). In such cases, the child is approached outside of home, usually at kindergarten or at school. At the request of the special representative for the child, a person the child trusts (a safety person, 'trygghetsperson') asks the child to follow the safety person and the child's special representative to the Barnahus. The safety person accompanies the child to and from the Barnahus and stays there during the interviews (Landberg and Svedin 2013). Against this background, one issue explored in this chapter is children's experiences of being summoned and brought to Barnahus without the knowledge and presence of their parents.

Methods

The study was conducted at one Barnahus. Because children who are in contact with Barnahus often are in a vulnerable position (Rasmusson 2011), a key concern in the study was how children's participation and need for protection could be balanced (cf. Alderson 2010; Ost 2013). In consultation with the executive group of the Barnahus, including representatives from the collaborating agencies, it was decided that the Barnahus coordinator and the child welfare caseworkers were in the best positions to assess a convenient time in the investigation process for a research intervention, and when to ask children and parents if they wanted to participate. When parents and a child had agreed to participate, the researchers took over and obtained informed consent from both the custodians and the child. Eight children were interviewed in person: three children (girls) 6–8 years old and five children (two boys and three girls) 14–15 years old. In dialogue with the participating child, the interviewing researcher phrased questions based on an interview guide, and then followed up according to the responses, using so-called listening questions (cf. Olsson 2010). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewing researcher.

The data were subjected to thematic analysis, a method for identifying and reporting patterns within qualitative data that emphasise the content of what is being said (Katz 2013). Two main themes were identified in this process (1) children's understanding of Barnahus, and (2) children's experiences of being summoned without their parent's knowledge and presence. It is not possible to fully enter somebody else's lifeworld, but we can obtain glimpses into one another's social worlds through communication and dialogue (cf. Gergen 2009; Johansson 2003; Shotter 2009). Quotations and excerpts from the interviews are used to suggest how the children expressed themselves when inviting us into their world (cf. Kohler Riessman 1990). It should be noted that the translation from Swedish to English may slightly change the impression of their utterances.

Barnahus from Children's Perspectives: A House of Police

The children at first felt being summoned to Barnahus as something unpleasant. They became worried and felt uncomfortable. The invitation and accompanying persons gave them very little information. Parents and safety persons were often not familiar with Barnahus, and the others present when children were summoned, child welfare caseworkers and special representatives for children, did not seem to want to say much. The children felt that their questions were not answered.

I could ask questions but I did not get much of an answer. They could answer: 'You have to wait and see' or 'You have to ask the person we will meet there'. (Sara 14 yrs)

Feelings of fear, nervousness and anxiety emerged for the children. As time went on, they understood that it was the police they were going to meet. In the view of the children, Barnahus now became a 'House of Police' [polishus], an impression they retained: this was a place to meet and talk with the police about serious matters.

Without being informed about why they were summoned, the children did not know what kind of meeting they were approaching or who was in trouble. Had something happened to somebody in their families? Was the child accused of something? Was the child going to be approached as a witness or victim?

I was a little bit nervous or whatever you can say about it, because I didn't know what was going to happen. What if I had done something? What ever has happened causing this? (Sara 14 yrs)

Arriving at Barnahus, the children became both surprised and confused. The police who welcomed them did not wear a uniform, nor did the house look like a police station, rather quite nice and welcoming. Kajsa, 8 years old, remembers a house with brown bricks with a door with a name plate full of colours, a rainbow. At the entrance, there were steps, a railing, a lift, a potted plant, journals and newspapers. Inside the Barnahus, there was a hall with a toilet and a play room where they were directed to take a seat:

Yes, there were armchairs, a sofa and a table with lemonade, three glasses and a jug, a drawing table, a box and a dollhouse [...] You can talk about what you want to [...] and do what you like in there [...] only the kids got to do what they wanted [...] open in another way than at a police station—that would be more scary. (Kajsa 8 yrs)

The youngest children in the interviews seemed to have some difficulties in remembering or understanding what was going on at Barnahus, but Kajsa, did, even if at first she found it difficult to understand what the police wanted to talk about. When the police disclosed who they were going to talk about, however, then Kajsa knew, as she explained:

Otherwise, [when I am] not visiting the Barnahus, it is no problems with my understanding or memory. (Kajsa 8 yrs)

In our interview, she made several colourful drawings of the different rooms, giving detailed accounts of what a Barnahus could be from a child's perspective.

I remember details of the Barnahus but I don't remember what we were talking about because I ... (points to her head and make a wry face).
(Kajsa 8 yrs)

Kajsa also revealed how she knew the difference between the playroom, as she called the room with the sofa and toys, and the room with the green thorny carpet, a sheep skin rug lying in one of the two green arm chairs and the two scary cameras, the room the children sit in during the interviews. Showing drawings of the two rooms she said: 'Here you talk and in there you play'.

Naemi, 7 years old, summarised her visit to Barnahus together with her father, in the following narrative: 'I talked to the police. Had coffee and watched Pippi on TV'.

She also remembered how her father had tested the chair in the interview room and how they could wave to each other through the video when she was shown into the next room where another policeman sat and watched.

Stina, 6 years old, visited Barnahus together with her mother. She summarised her experience with following words:

A place with chocolate milk, no, lemonade and biscuits and dollhouse and video, Pippi Longstocking. (Stina 6 yrs)

Elisabeth, 14 years old, gave an account of what happens upon arrival and how important the support of the special representative for the children could be, including when you have to wait:

... then I go into the room with the sofa and there sits [FirstName] a lawyer and then he tells us (...) all that is going to happen: I will go into the room and there will be cameras, they will film everything and I should not be worried about it or anything. (...) I thought that was very good. Because then you are prepared and know what is going to happen. Then I had to wait a while and then I went into the room where I was interviewed. (...) I felt comfortable going in there—felt good to go in—there are cameras and [her child welfare case worker's name] was in the other room. (...) She [the police] asked a lot of questions and she could bring

them up over and over again to get a good enough response from me and then she went into [the other room] (...) and asked them if there was something they wanted to hear more about, or something like that, and then she came back and then there were a few more questions. (...) [Then I went] out of the room and went into the room with the sofa again and talked to [name of the special representative for children] who said ‘it takes time before anything more happens’. I don’t remember exactly what he said. And so, he said that I had been really good and brave because I dared to tell them everything and so ... (Elisabeth 14 yrs)

The special representative for children who participated in four of the cases, the children call “their lawyer”. They talk about the lawyer as a person who was used to be at the Barnahus, knew what was going on and who could explain and assist them in understanding the processes of Barnahus. In three of the cases, the child welfare caseworker also assisted the child at Barnahus. The children talked about this approach by the special representative for children and the child welfare caseworker as helping them to calm down and settle for the interview with the police. This was important for the children. Eric, 14 years old, explained this in the following statement:

You feel calm when you have settled there. Then it does not feel strange to go there. After all, it is something, a reason for you to be there—then it would not be good if there was something even more scary or sad or something like that there. It is necessary that you feel safe. (Eric 14 yrs)

In summary, to be summoned to Barnahus aroused feelings of worry and nervousness. When travelling to Barnahus, the accompanying persons either did not know or did not want to inform the children about what was happening or why. This strengthened the children’s anxiety when approaching Barnahus and meeting the police. Upon arrival, Barnahus appeared to be a welcoming, nice and cosy house of police, where lemonade, biscuits, toys and videos were offered, co-creating feelings of safety and security. In the view of the children, Barnahus became a child-friendly ‘House of Police’, a place where children could talk about serious matters with the police.

Scary but Necessary: To Be Summoned Without Parent's Knowledge

Three of the children had been summoned and brought to Barnahus without their parents' knowledge and without any preparation, creating a sudden event from the perspective of the child. As Sara, one of the children, reported:

The school welfare officer came for me in the school 20 or 2 min before the departure took place. She said we were going for a ride. (Sara 14 yrs)

About being surprised and not prepared Sara said:

It was quite nice that we were 'picked up' like this:—'Let's go with this then ' Yes, it could have been 'you can decide whether you want to go with me or not', however it was much more comfortable that they just said: 'you are going with us now'. (Sara 14 yrs)

It seems to have been a relief for Sara that she did not have to take responsibility for choosing whether she should go to Barnahus or not. The travel to the Barnahus, however, became a hard time for Sara:

Yes, a lot of thoughts spun in my head. What is happening now? What is going to happen? What have I done now? What has happened? Has something happened to my mum? Has something happened to my sister? Has something happened to dad? And so this ... (Sara 14 yrs)

During the journey to Barnahus she asked questions:

I didn't get much response from them [...] To some questions, they said 'you must wait and see' and 'you may take it up with them when we meet them there' [...] it was two policemen they said we were going to meet. I thought it was two policemen in full outfits, with uniforms and all that I was going to meet, but it was, well, two civilians or how do you put it, two ordinary people. (Sara 14 yrs)

Sara appreciated having the school welfare officer accompanying her, a person she recognised from school. She felt better with the information given by the special representative for children and the police after their arrival at Barnahus:

You feel, that it felt ... that we felt safe when we stepped in there. It felt like not at all rough [...] more as soft to get into [...] where you can act and become the child you are [...] you don't need to be in any particular way or like this—you get to be yourself there [...] We didn't have to feel and act as grown-ups, but be children. In school, at home and otherwise, it's easy to become and act as a grown-up. But here it was more like: 'Yes, well, but do what you want. If you're sitting here and are 14 years old playing with a dollhouse—we don't care—be yourself.' Like, be a child if you want to—be an adult if you want to. At the police station, it felt more like I had to be an adult [...] it was more like this is for real now, it is really for real now, and serious. But at Barnahus it was not so. (Sara 14 yrs)

Vera, 14 years old, and Isac, 15 years old, also had experiences of being summoned and brought to Barnahus without their parents knowing. Vera was picked up by a child welfare caseworker at the school shortly after school began in the morning. Vera had never met the child welfare caseworker but a familiar teacher accompanied her, both during the journey to Barnahus and the entire day.

I wasn't prepared for it happening, no, so first I was shocked and sad. So I don't know what really happened. Everything was going so damn fast. They came and picked us up and explained what it was and then we were there. [...] I didn't want to at first, because I was scared. (Vera 14 yrs)

Isac knew something was about to happen soon because he was the one who had given away the secret of an abusing father to the police and had been asked by the school and the child welfare caseworkers to keep silent and not tell anyone about the report of the abuse. He had known for 3 days that something was going to happen making a change for the better for him and his younger siblings.

It wouldn't have been good to reveal anything to (the brother's name) because he usually says things to our parents and if they had found out, we would never ever have gone to school or something that day. It felt good, knowing all that would disappear, however, I did know something was going to happen but not what—not that it would be to Barnahus, and I didn't know it existed. (Isac 15 yrs)

Knowing his father would become very angry when he received the information about the report of abuse, Isac kept silent. With no information during the journey to Barnahus, Isac had been worried about whether his father was going to be there when they arrived. That would have been a very difficult meeting, he said. He was also worried about what was going to happen afterwards. Isac and his siblings had to stay at the Barnahus for several hours, waiting for the result of the assessments of the child welfare service and necessary arrangements. Now and then somebody entered the room, giving information or asking questions and the children took the chance to ask questions. This gave them a feeling of hope and of being involved. They sat there the whole day, from arriving in the morning until half five or five, each with a teacher and the special representative, except for the interviews and a short visit to buy groceries, and the room became crowded. There were several opportunities for worries and uncertainties:

I was hoping to avoid having to go home—my father had found out everything. He would probably not be too happy. They said perhaps we had to go home but they were trying to fix something else, a place where we could go [...]. It was quite difficult to find, and I think it was. Then they found [name of place] or what it was in [name of a city]. Then we went there and stayed there ... (Isac 15 yrs)

In summary, to be summoned to Barnahus without their parent's knowing aroused mixed feelings of worry and nervousness, but also of relief and hope of change. The children appreciated that they were listened to and given support. Although they had shown that they were ready for a change and to contribute, they were not consulted or given the information they needed and asked for until they arrived at the Barnahus.

Discussion and Conclusions

Children summoned to Barnahus in Sweden could be prepared and accompanied by a parent (Kaldal et al. 2010; Rasmusson 2008); however, in cases where the parents cannot become involved, a special representative for children is appointed. Instead of the parents, the special representative protects the child's rights in the legal procedures during the criminal investigation.

As the institution Barnahus has become established, the use of special representatives for children seems to have increased. In the beginning, a special representative for children was provided in 26% of the cases (Rejmer and Hansen 2008) and later in up to 50% of the cases (Gustafsson 2011; Holmsten 2009; Kaldal et al. 2010). As special representatives for children are primarily used when a parent is under suspicion, there are reasons to assume that many of the children summoned to Barnahus have been summoned without parents becoming involved. On the other hand, the special representative for children is usually a lawyer and, as the children in the study stated, the special representative had experience of, and knowledge about, the proceedings at Barnahus which parents cannot be expected to have. The special representatives chose not to give more detailed information until later, however, when the child has become a little more acquainted with the Barnahus.

The withholding of information when children are summoned, as well as at Barnahus, is based on the idea that information may influence the child and in consideration of what the child is going to disclose in the upcoming child investigative interview conducted by the police (Landberg and Svedin 2013). A key purpose of the concept of Barnahus is to improve child criminal investigations. The result of the police child investigative interview is crucial for the outcome of the investigation. The agencies collaborate in facilitating the child to disclose what has really happened and in not creating false stories in the police interview.

Not giving enough information to the child to help them feel comfortable with the situation, however, is also a way of influencing the outcome. This can, as heard in the study, create feelings of fear, uneasiness and insecurity in the child. When the child poses questions like:

'what is going on?', and these are answered evasively, it allows for many thoughts and wide scopes of imagination, including fearing the worst, as to both why the child is summoned to Barnahus and what is going to happen at Barnahus and afterwards. A child's understanding of what is going on could easily involve the assumption that something dangerous has happened to someone in the family. For example, one of the children summoned and brought to Barnahus without parental knowledge or consent became anxious that something might have happened to a family member or that she herself had done something wrong, especially when she did not get any answers to her questions. Would she not have been in better shape, approaching the police interview, if she had received enough information—thus avoiding this increased anxiety?

On the other hand, this non-involvement approach of the professionals can also be experienced and felt as a relief, as seen in the study. Being approached as a child, and not being expected to act and take any responsibility as 'an adult', allows children to respond as a child, to play with dolls and other toys, and not to have to make any (more) decisions. This transfer of responsibility, 'just do what you are told', is literally and in practice showing the child that the professionals are taking over because they take the child's experiences seriously and are ready to protect the child if necessary. This might relieve the negative stress the child might feel, but it also creates expectations of adaptation to what the adults are asking for.

At the same time, a child who is not given a reason for the summons, not even when they ask what is going on, is not respected as an acting subject with the right to information and support, in order to understand what is going on and why. When seen as a child living in a vulnerable situation, the child is approached as a victim in need of protection and a non-acting object (cf. Eriksson 2009; Eriksson and Näsman 2008). Gradually, the child starts to respond to the approach in use, accepting that they will be brought to and be at Barnahus without further questioning; however, soon, in the interview with the police, the child is expected to become an acting subject remembering details of experienced occurrences of violence and abuse. The impact of these preparations, aimed at getting a child ready for a police interview when there are suspicions of child abuse and violence, is an important area for

further research including further inquiries about children's experiences of being summoned to Barnahus without their parents' consent, knowledge or presence.

Acting in the child investigative interview with the police is hard work for children. The older children explained that this was something they had to do if they wanted to put an end to the bad things that went on. In the middle of the cosy atmosphere, the child is expected to expose and disclose difficult memories. Entering the police interview room, the children are expected to transform into actors, answering questions and describing episodes in detail. Leaving the playroom, and entering the interview room, some of the children needed a reminder or a hint from the police before they understood what and whom they were going to talk about. We know very little about how the younger children understood Barnahus, except that all the children, including the youngest, associated Barnahus first and foremost with the police and second with biscuits, fruit drinks, toys and video films for young children. Kajsa, 8 years old, gave an account that showed that she knew the difference between play and the serious part of Barnahus: '—You play in the playroom, talk in the green room [police interview room]'. In the latter room, the children were supposed to perform hard work, which could feel stressful. This study did not address how successful the children were in becoming acting subjects in the investigative interviews, expected to give away secrets that they had so far very seldom, if ever, unmasked. No conclusions can thus be drawn about the influences of the preceding processes in the outcome of the police interviews. Further research exploring these presumed connections would be helpful in finding out whether existing procedures for summoning and bringing a child to Barnahus are warranted or whether there are reasons for making changes. According to what has been revealed in this study, the child's right to information and support in understanding what is going on and why is not fulfilled in existing routines and procedures (see also Chap. 10). Examples of where the child's right to participate and become respected as an acting subject, taking the child's view, ability and opinion into consideration, rarely appear in the children's narratives about becoming summoned to Barnahus, with one crucial exception—entering the room of the police child investigate interview. By entering

the room with the police and the cameras, they were expected to stop being children at play, be able to focus and act as responsible subjects talking about serious matters—become the acting subjects they acted as and talked about being in the research interviews.

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