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An Assessment of Two Parenting Training Manuals Used in Swedish Parenting Interventions

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In Sweden, all parents of children aged 0–18 years are entitled to attend free parenting courses as part of a national strategy adopted by Parliament in 2009. This broad parental support welfare strategy is expected to fulfil the intentions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this study, two parenting training manuals were analysed: the Canadian Connect program, based on attachment theory, and the Swedish ABC program, based on social learning theory. The results indicate that the manuals use strategies that can both hinder and support children's rights, regardless of rhetoric of children's best interests. © *2017 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau*

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Introduction

In many European countries, parenting training courses have been put forward as important measures to safeguard children's healthy development. These policy choices are often based on the assumption that parents need expert advice in order to fulfil their parental tasks (Daly, 2007, p. 9; Janta, 2013; McConnell and others, 2012; Parton, 2006; Smeyers, 2010; Smith, 1997). In Sweden, a country with a long tradition of parental support, a national strategy was adopted by Parliament in 2009: the 'National Strategy for Developed Parental Support — A Benefit for All' (SOU, 2008:131). This strategy offers all parents of children aged 0–17 free access to expert-led manual-based courses in order to support them in coping with everyday parenting challenges. Parenting training can, according to the strategy,

> promote mental health and prevent mental illness among children and young people, by reducing psychosomatic symptoms like anxiety, depression, sleeping disorders, tiredness and headache among school children, and thus promote health and prevent ill health among children and youth.
>
> (R, 2013:05; SOU, 2008:131)

The strategy's approach to parent–child relations relies on a preventive perspective, in which parenting training is expected to promote children's development into healthy adults (SOU, 2008:131).

In the absence of Swedish evidence-based parenting training programs, social services have until recently favoured universal parenting programs adapted from Anglo-Saxon origins. However, the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU) has expressed a fear that the program manuals might lack cultural transferability and have poor understanding of Nordic parenting styles and views on childhood (Gustafsson and Smedje, 2013; SBU, 2010). Nordic parenting styles postulate parenting

strategies based on children's rights, as expressed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which has been an intrinsic element of social welfare policies since the 1990s.

Children's rights in parenting training

There is a rhetorical consensus among politicians, practitioners and researchers in Europe that the best interests of the child and children's rights to protection, promotion and participation should be guiding principles in all areas of social work that concern children (Johansson, 2003; Nutbrown, 1996; Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2003; Roose and Bouverne-de Bie, 2007). In the case of Sweden, it has been stated that 'all interventions that affect children shall acknowledge children's rights' (SOU, 1997:116). The UNCRC has been a guiding principle in social services since it was ratified in 1990, and so there has been an expectation that its intentions (UNCRC, 1989) should be fulfilled in public parenting training interventions. This specific rights aspect in parenting was developed in Sweden's National Strategy to Strengthen the Rights of the Child, where parenting training was described as an

> activity that gives parents the knowledge of the child's health, emotional, cognitive and social development and/or strengthens their social networks, based on evidence-based models, methods and applications with a set of values based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
>
> (Rpr, 2009/10:232)

Regardless of political intentions to fulfil children's rights in Europe, the issue has been inherently charged with complexity. In a report published by the Council of Europe, respect for children's views and the best interests of the child were claimed as primary considerations in parenting (Daly, 2007). However, intrinsic contradictions are hidden in these lines, often explained as a dichotomy between passive and active articles in the UNCRC; that is, between protection and participation (Archard, 2010). A possible conflict between parents' right to protect and children's right to participate was noted even as the convention was being processed, and was addressed by describing children's right to autonomy and participation as increasing with age and maturity (Hammarberg, 1990). This did not entirely solve the problem, as shown in a literature review of international research studies on children's rights performed between 1990 and 2010. Two of the most frequent research areas concerning the UNCRC during this period were autonomy and participation as new norms in children's rights practices, and children's rights in relation to parents' rights (Reynaert and others, 2009). Despite many efforts to define the power balance between children and parents from a rights perspective, the specific area of parenting training still seems to suffer from a lack of definition of how children's rights should be realised in parenting.

'Child perspective' is an expression often rhetorically used in Sweden to establish affiliation to a children's rights paradigm. A child perspective basically presupposes that all social policy decisions should consider how children are affected, with children's best interest as the main principle. The term child perspective is not used by the UNCRC itself, but has often in the past been used as an analytical research tool. Still, due to poorly explained definitions, its usability has been disputed as lacking in clarity and distinction (Halldén, 2009; Sommer, 2003).

Some researchers have advocated the term 'children's perspective' to clarify when children themselves are heard or have their say. Even so, the term can be disputed, depending on how the word 'perspective' is interpreted (Qvarsell, 2001; Sommer, 2003). The Swedish National Strategy for Developed Parental Support (SOU, 2008:131) established in 2009 that parenting training should be based on a child perspective, but without defining how

children's rights could be realised. Bearing in mind the difficulties of defining a child perspective, this study will address how power relations between parents and children are present in parenting training manuals.

Realisation of children's rights in parenting training does not boil down to defining active and passive articles in the UNCRC. Similarly, this study does not treat children's rights as a dichotomy of standpoints, which could direct attention away from mediation and connections (Prout, 2011). The realisation of children's rights has in this study been treated as a contextualised process influenced by adults' attitudes and concepts of children and adult-child relations.

The aim of the present study was to reveal how parent–child interaction is outlined in two manual-based parenting training programs implemented by Swedish social services for universal use: the Canadian Connect manual, based on attachment theory (Bretherton, 1996) and focusing on interpersonal relationships, and the Swedish All Children in Focus (ABC) manual, based on social learning theory and focusing on cognitive processes (Bandura and others, 1999) with some influences from attachment theory. Both programs were introduced in Sweden during 2011–2012 as alternatives to existing interventions, which were mostly based on social learning theory and had no reference to children's rights, which is an issue of great concern in current Swedish social policies. The study focused on how the two manual programs relate to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The intention has been to contribute with knowledge and understanding of how children are positioned in universal parenting training, arguing that a rights perspective could have implications for parenting training interventions.

Methodology

With a reflexive stance involving interaction between empiric and interpretative description (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 1994), a qualitative inductive design was used to define discrepancies and similarities in the texts (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). Aspects of children's positions in the family and power relations between children and parents were taken into account (Halldén, 2009; Johansson, 2003; Qvarsell, 2001; Sommer, 2003), as well as the values regarding children's rights to participation and protection expressed in the UNCRC (1989).

Data material

The Connect parenting program
The Connect parenting training program is produced by the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre and Simon Fraser University in Canada (Figure 1) (Moretti and Obsuth, 2009; Moretti and others, 2011). It was initially designed as a selective program for parents of pre-pubescent and adolescent children diagnosed with severe behavioural disorders and mental health problems. In Sweden it is also implemented as a universal program for parents of children aged 9–17. The Connect manual for group leaders is an extensive volume with descriptions of how each session should be realised, including session format, aims, and goals; role play examples; background and further reading material.

The manual is structured as nine basic sessions and one follow-up session. It uses four components of secure connection: sensitivity of parenthood, cooperation and reciprocity, ability to reflect as a parent, and dyadic affect regulation. The idea is to encourage parents and guardians 'to think about new ways to understand their children and their behaviour, new ways of understanding themselves and their behaviour as parents, as well as new opportunities in parenting' (Moretti and Obsuth, 2009; Moretti and others, 2011). Information is mixed with role play and discussions.

Domains	Subcategories	Categories	Theme
Structuring the family	Practise sensitivity Choose perspective Use empathy	Responsiveness skills	**Contemplate yourself and recognize your child**
	Give confirmation Create coherence Be available	Supportive attitude	
	Be receptive Interpret meanings Exchange messages	Communication patterns	
Processing relations	Adjust space Cope with feelings Steer in head wind	Conflict management	
	Acknowledge experiences Accept change Interact on equal terms	Mutual respect	
	Encourage growth Let go Develop together	Encouraging emancipation	

Connect

Figure 1. The Domains, categories and theme of the Connect program.

The ABC parenting program

All Children in Focus was developed by local social services in Stockholm, Sweden, in cooperation with researchers at the Karolinska Institutet (Figure 2) (Lönn Rhodin and Lalouni, 2012). Questionnaires and interviews with parents were used as reference, as well as experiences drawn from the Swedish Komet program (Dahlman and von Otter, 2004). ABC is implemented as a universal course for parents of children aged 3–12. The ABC manual consists of a hard cover along with exchangeable files containing short instructions for group leaders about pedagogical approach, methodology, session structures, themes, facts and questions to discuss; space is provided for writing notes. The manual is structured as four basic sessions and one follow-up session. It uses four themes: showing love (parental factors, five to one, focus on what works), being there (the interaction chain), showing the way (annoyance and anger) and picking your battles (natural consequences). The idea is to promote children's positive development by strengthening parent–child relations. Parents are encouraged to use their own knowledge to enhance their parenting skills. During sessions, parents are informed about current research on parenting and child development. Information is mixed with role play, short films about typical situations and discussions (Lindberg and others, 2013).

Data analysis

Identical analytic processes were used for the texts in the two manuals, drawing on the work of Elo and Kyngäs (2008). The texts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the contents, and were then organised into preliminary domains subsuming the main features of each manual. These domains served as dialectic tools to interpret the interrelated dynamics of the content in the two manuals throughout the analytic process. The manuals were then re-read, section by section, while meaning units were decontextualised. The meaning units

Domains	Subcategories	Categories	Theme
Organizing everyday life	Review patterns of communication Adjust time frames Predict consequences	Preventive planning	Damming the brook
	Be a role model Positive leadership Influence behaviours	Planned governing	
	Think in advance Gain knowledge Rise to challenges	Maintaining control	
Adapting relational strategies	Break up patterns Positive interaction Deal with pressure	Positive action	
	Broaden the framework Be present Sense of community	Showing commitment	
	Understand the consequences See your child Support growth	Child focus	

ABC

Figure 2. The Domains, categories and theme of the ABC program.

were condensed and labelled with codes, which were then grouped and sorted into subcategories and categories. The categories were allocated to the respective domains in groups of three. Finally, analytic themes were formulated to depict the power positions between parents and children as displayed by the analysis. No ethical considerations were applicable to the analysis of the texts.

Findings

The results demonstrate that the two parenting training manuals of Connect and ABC display discrepancies in their parenting strategies. The messages brought forward in the manuals are conceptualised in the analysis as metaphorical themes: *contemplate yourself and recognise your child* (Connect) and *damming the brook* (ABC). As a contextualised process of adults' position towards children, these discrepancies are related to children's rights of protection and participation.

Contemplate yourself and recognise your child

The theme of the Connect parenting training program is conceptualised by the metaphor *contemplate yourself and recognise your child* depicting a reflective parenting strategy where the parent is encouraged to recognise similarities between adults and children. The key features are expressed in two domains: *structuring the family* and *processing relations* (Figure 3).

Structuring the family
The domain of *structuring the family* reveals how parents are encouraged to train their responsiveness skills, supportive attitudes and communicative patterns towards the child.

Figure 3. The Connect logo.

Training responsiveness skills implies that child–parent attachment can be improved if children's behaviours and needs are acknowledged. Parents are encouraged to 'realise that the need for attachment is expressed by good and bad behaviours' (p. 57) and to 'discover the attachment message behind the behaviour' (p. 57). Parental responsiveness skills will be enhanced by practicing sensitivity, moving one's focus towards the child and inducing empathy.

Supportive attitudes allow family relations to be strengthened as parents practice a dynamic unit of attachment and appraisal. The key is to move focus towards the children once more, and try to 'experience another person's feelings as if they were your own' (p. 113). This attitude revolves around the concept of security, which is related to parental capacity to give confirmation, create coherence in daily life, and be available as a parent in an environment which children can experience as safe.

Communicative patterns deal with the changing nature of attachment during children's growth: 'Children develop patterns of expressing their needs; needs of attachment are conveyed in different ways as the children grow and develop' (p. 40).

Processing relations

Two prominent features of the communication process are refining the parental receptivity towards children, and developing interpretation skills and reciprocity of messages. This forms a stepping stone towards the action-oriented domain of *processing relations*.

This domain concerns parents' and children's reciprocal movements in communication, characterised by *conflict management*, *mutual respect* and *encouraging emancipation*.

Conflict management is concerned with promoting awareness of mutuality and afterthought to achieve conflict solutions on equal terms; to 'be conscious of the relation between your own needs and the needs of the children while committing to both stands at the same time' (p. 131). It is facilitated by allowing more space for the children's positions as active participants in the family, coping with one's own reactions and feelings, and appreciating that changes do not always come easily.

Mutual respect indicates that parental acceptance of children's individuality and change is 'a challenge to how we look upon ourselves' (p. 156). Relational change and interacting with mutuality includes the ability to distinguish between children and parents as individuals, and accept children's own experiences and needs.

Encouraging emancipation serves both as a closing area and an open door towards the children, 'a reminder that the children move on in life, independent of the parent' (p. 162). Parents are expected to embark on a developmental stretch where children and parents are interrelated. They are both connected and moving apart in mutual exchange, maintaining a close but not static relationship.

Damming the brook

The theme of the ABC family training program is conceptualised by the metaphor *damming the brook* depicting a parenting strategy of leadership to hinder conflicts and problems with children at an early stage, preferably before they arise. The key features are expressed in two domains: *organising everyday life* and *adapting relational strategies* (Figure 4).

Organising everyday life

The domain of *organising everyday life* reveals how parents are initially guided to make constructive choices in situations that from an adult position need to be dealt with by *preventive planning*, *planned governing* and *maintaining control*.

Preventive planning deals with initial conflict management and negative child–parent relations. The advice is to think one step ahead and predict consequences while dealing with time issues that may eventually lead to conflicts: 'you can approach the child in a way that lessens the risk for conflicts with the child' (p. 4:4b). The planning is staged as a strategy to review the parent–child communication, handle time frames and accept that behaviours are sequential.

Planned governing deals with concepts of a universal child development process. The parents are encouraged to understand that they, both intentionally and unintentionally, possess the power to shape their children's behaviour. Children are described as 'imitating adult language, intonation, manners in social situations and body language. Children imitate fears' (p. 1:4a). The parental task includes being a good role model, showing leadership and understanding how behaviours are influenced.

Maintaining control concludes the organisation domain by advising parents to practise self-reflection when faced with upcoming problems. Parents are encouraged to use their knowledge about mental and physical reactions, as 'Consciousness about your own critical situations makes them easier to influence' (p. 3:6b). Thinking ahead, gaining knowledge about child behaviour and a constructive approach to everyday challenges in family relations prepares one for the action-oriented domain of *adapting relational strategies*.

Adapting relational strategies

The domain of *adapting relational strategies* proposes a preventive set of tools to influence and develop daily relations via *positive action*, *showing commitment* and *keeping a 'child focus'*.

Positive action is used in the program as a step towards active control of the family situation by exchanging negative parenting, such as nagging and corrections, for positive interaction, because 'children learn from their parents to deal with conflicts by screaming and shouting; they learn that they get attention in conflict situations' (p. 3:2a). Positive action relies on breaking up negative patterns, and parents interacting with their children in a positive manner and coping constructively with stressful situations.

Figure 4. The ABC logo.

Showing commitment conceptualises parenting in relational harmony by weighing warmth and love with limits: 'Five times more positive attention than negative attention is needed to create balance in the relation' (p. 1:7b). This suggested balance will challenge the parents to leave space for their children's autonomy, while strengthening the relationship through presence and acts of community.

Keeping a 'child focus' concludes the preventive training towards building positive family relations. The overall message is incorporated in the sentiment that 'good family relations act as prevention against hardships that children can be subject to' (p. 1:2b). Good parenting is dependent on adult factors such as acknowledging the consequences of one's own actions, understanding the child's reactions and behaviour and supporting the child's growth.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to reveal how parent–child interaction is outlined in two manual-based parenting training programs implemented by Swedish social services for universal use.

The study focused on children's rights to protection and participation as expressed in the UNCRC (1989) while analysing the material from a parenting perspective. A need for new methods to evaluate universal parental training has guided research process as the analysis rests on an assumption that both the increasing use of universal parental programs and changing concepts of childhood call for new directions in parenting training interventions. The same reasoning was used in a British report on parental support in early childhood, stating that *there are fundamental questions to be asked about whether the assumptions about 'good' parenting that underlie the various intervention models used around the world are sufficiently informed by the great variety of ways in which children are helped by their parents to live good lives* (Oates, 2010). How children and parents are interrelated and positioned in society must consequently be considered in universal parenting training interventions.

Archard suggests that the dominant view of children in modern Western society still reflects an 'Aristotelian conception' of childhood, meaning that a human child is immature but has the potential to develop into a normal, standard adult (Archard, 2010). Thus, the child is not viewed by society primarily as a human 'being' but as a human becoming. The child is not yet rational, not yet accountable, not yet competent, a citizen in waiting. Children's points of view, opinions and desires tend to be ignored because of their age (Gadda, 2008; Lee, 2001; Roose and Bouverne-de Bie, 2007; Verhellen, 2000).

The results are discussed below in the light of Swedish policies on parenting training, and some suggestions for future research are provided.

Swedish parenting training interventions basically use a risk-prevention approach, which is apparent in the choices of programs and methods (SOU, 2008:131). This preventive policy is a social construct which assumes that certain kinds of risks, such as inadequate parenting strategies, are more relevant to child development than other risks (Nuffield Council of Bioethics, 2007). The results show that from a risk-prevention perspective both programs harmonise with current Swedish policies: a preventive approach to parenting paired with parental responsibility is seen as a decisive protective factor in child development.

Swedish parenting training interventions use children's rights as a prerequisite, defined as a 'child perspective' and adult responsibility. Even if the program manuals do not discuss children's rights in their handling of child–parent relations, neither program contests these policies.

Taking these similarities into account, the two programs still display major content discrepancies. The differences appear to be related to socially constructed concepts of child–parent relations, children's rights, and how children and parents are enabled or hindered in different ways to act in the continuous process of parenting and development.

The conclusive theme of the Connect manual, conceptualised by the metaphor *contemplate yourself and recognise your child*, indicates that the program does not resort to a preventive risk-security assessment of child–parent relations. Parents are encouraged to remember and relate to their own previous life experiences and behaviour patterns of action. They are given support to acknowledge their children's own life experiences, values, and needs, and ways of expressing and communicating their opinions. The parents are encouraged to interact with their children on the basis of mutuality, respect, diversity and human equity. The conclusive theme of the ABC manual, on the other hand, is conceptualised by the metaphor *damming the brook*, which in other words could be described as stopping problems before they develop. This methodology fits in well with a risk-prevention paradigm. Parents are encouraged to gain self-control, strengthen their leadership, and foresee mechanisms behind their children's reactions of aggression and non-compliance. Parents are also trained to control anger and impulsive actions, and to recognise their task as role models. The intent is that they will be positively inspired to relate to their children with sensitivity, and to understand their children's needs and behaviours. The adult perspective is prominent, and children are essentially viewed as dependent objects in the child–parent relational context. This adult position corresponds with findings from earlier research on manual-based programs (Pharès, 2012).

Modern parenting training programs are expected to acknowledge the importance of mutual respect and rights within the family (Lansdown, 2005). The two programs analysed in this study do make some attempts to level off unbalanced power relations between adults and children.

Still more radical steps concerning children's rights in parenting training might need to be taken in order justify expensive parental training interventions within today's multi-facetted societies.

One of these steps would be to address seriously the portal articles of the UNCRC (1989) when developing new universal programs. This would follow that researchers, program designers and policy-makers might find themselves embarking on a journey to reassess the use of adult driven methods. Methods that might or might not be in the child's best interest of Article 3, or in the line of Article 12. Such a commitment would probably include shattering of a risk-prevention paradigm which is concentrated on children as human becomings, in favour of more clearly health promotion oriented program contents.

Although the Connect manual does not mention or relate to the UNCRC (1989), the child's right to participation (Article 12) is articulated and supported in training of interaction and empathy, emphasising reciprocity in family relations. The rights perspective in the manual appears twofold, putting both children's autonomy and adults' responsibility in focus. This ambition ties in well with the mix of autonomy and protection in the guiding principles of the UNCRC (1989).

The ABC parenting program claims to adhere to the UNCRC (1989), but does not relate to the conventions in the manual. An overarching adult perspective on children's best interests is demonstrated, as parental responsibility to build a safe family environment is supported as a major parenting strategy (Article 3), while children's rights to participation (Article 12) receives less emphasis. Some indirect acknowledgements of children's rights to protection, promotion and participation can be traced in the manual, but no references are made to connections between suggested parenting strategies and children's rights.

This result corresponds with previous research, showing that parenting training manuals generally neither problematise nor make children's rights concrete (Widding and Olsson, 2014).

Further research

There is a need for further scientific evaluations of program contents that problematise the implications of parenting strategy programs for universal use (Pećnik and Lalière, 2007, p. 15; Pharès, 2012). Such studies are still scarce, but will contribute knowledge about normative concepts of childhood and how children's social positions and rights are established and legitimised in the programs.

Considerations and pre-understanding

Research in social science should carefully avoid conveying solely 'common-sense' knowledge (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 1994, p. 91). Results should be valued and regarded in the light of previous research, in order to circumvent reiteration and triviality. Many scholars have contributed with important perspectives on late modern parenting practices (Clarke, 2006; Gambles, 2008; Pain, 2006; Reece, 2013; Smeyers, 2008; Smith, 2010; Young, 2007). Ramaekers and Suissa (2011) made a solid analysis of late modern parenting. Parenting, they claimed, has become a learning project of effectiveness, relying on developmental psychology, behavioural psychology and neuro psychology.

A few research studies have concentrated on the content of parenting training manuals. Widding (2015) and Pharès (2012) are two Nordic examples of research that is concerned with values in parenting training. The purpose of the present study was to reveal how current parenting strategies are outlined in two parenting training manuals. The Connect and ABC were chosen from among a wide range of manual based programs. Both ABC were recently introduced for universal interventions in Sweden and are currently in use. The study focused on children's rights to protection and participation while analysing the material from a parenting perspective. This is regarded as strength, as the result contributes new information about the content of parenting training in the light of children's rights. However, more studies are needed to examine how and to what extent parenting support is connected to the intentions of the UNCRC. Another way to approach the data could have been to focus on a parent perspective. The results would then have been less child-oriented.

Analysing an elaborate program manual differs from, for example, analysing data derived from interviews. Manuals have by definition a conscious purpose, and a clear message that in itself already contains the sender's analysis of the message's meaning. This makes the researcher's task of managing pre-understanding particularly important. As a qualitative content analysis relies on close and deep understanding of the manuals, the awareness of pre-understanding was very important in this analysis. Care was taken to remain neutral and to reflect with openness on previous research in the field.

Conclusion

The results show that the manuals use strategies that can both hinder and support children's rights beyond the rhetoric of children's best interests. The Connect parenting program and the ABC parenting program use similar pedagogical learning structures, closely adhering to a preventive approach. Both programs advocate parental responsibility as a decisive protective factor in child development, while attempting to level off unbalanced power relations between adults and children. Nevertheless, the two programs display strategic discrepancies when addressing child autonomy. The Connect manual uses a promotive and rights-based approach by forwarding children as autonomous agents in relation to adults in a mutual developmental process. The ABC program takes a more authoritative approach, with a manual connected to an adult-driven preventive approach with weaker adherence to child autonomy and children's rights. Parenting strategies, as conveyed by structured manuals, can

either hinder or support implementation of children's rights beyond the rhetorical 'best interests'. These strategies are presumably connected to definitions of child–parent relations and children's rights in the family. The result suggests that there is a need for further research to gain knowledge how parenting training can be developed in a context of late modern parenting practices and children's rights.

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