

## **“Difficult Children” - A Serious Sign of Children at Risk**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to put focus on families and children who have had contact to the social service department because of problems related children's well-being, health or development. Problems that are recognized by the families themselves and by the authorities as problems that put the family in a poor position regarding the children's well-being, health and development, but not so severe that the child is to be placed out of home.

The paper concentrates attention on differences between families with and without contact to the social service department for reasons related to the child. Especially on children and their development in social relations to children at the same age, on how the mothers experience their child and on the parent's resources concerning health, education and job situation.

The paper presents results from the first two data collections (1996 and 1999) in a prospective longitudinal study of more than five thousand children from a random sample of children born in 1995.

The results are that families with contact to the social service department have less emotional, economical and educational resources than families without contact. In addition the children have more conflicts in contact with their peers, more attention-related problems and less emotional or psychological resources. Furthermore the mothers experience more trouble in child rearing than what is found in an average family.

The results are important in the way that they attract attention to the child's own situation and to the children's problems. The preventive lesson is that the signs of conflict between children and their peers and children and their mothers may be sign not only of a "difficult child" but also of a child and a family where help is needed.

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## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to put focus on families and children who have had contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child's well-being, health or development. Problems that are recognized by the families themselves and by the authorities as problems that put the family in a poor position regarding the children's well-being, health and development, but not so severe that the child is to be placed out of home.

The analyses presented will be based on results from the first two data collections (1996 and 1999) in a prospective longitudinal study of more than five thousand children from a random sample of children born in 1995. The analyses will be concentrated on differences between families who receive service from the social service department because of problems related to the child (as described above) and families who do not receive service at all or who receive help for other reasons (for instance solely for economical problems or housing problems, which is statutory for families with children who need this kind of help).

This means that the focus is on a group of children and families who will not in all countries be regarded as a group of children or families in need of service from the social service department. They are not poor in the sense that they have no housing or no money for food and they do not have so serious problems that it is seen as necessary to place the child out of home (even this may be the case later). Still the families have problems in their lives and the Danish society has the opinion that it is necessary to find methods to help these children and families to prevent the situation getting worse meaning that the children eventually will be placed out of home and to prevent developmental damages and damages on the child's well-being and health (as stated in the social legislation).

In this aspect the paper may be very Danish (or at least very Nordic) as it relates to the discussion of the well-fare society and the assignments for society related to children and families.

### **From the Danish discussion**

The Danish society spends much money on families and children at risk, on placement out of home and on preventive efforts. There is a growing feeling that we know too little about the effects of what we are doing. Will the different efforts help in the sense of securing children's well-being, health and development or would it be better to use other methods? A description of the population who receive the preventive help (as in this study) may help to find an answer to the question of methods.

Another part of the discussion starts from the UN convention on children's rights. Especially the right to be heard on matters of concern for children's well-being and life. The social legislation follows this intention so far that the children have the right to be heard about their opinion for instance in case of placement out of home. Professionals working in the field do not too well follow this intention (Christensen, 1998; Egelund, 1997; Hestbæk, 1997). In fact children may receive a preventive effort or be placed out of home, even the professional in charge (the social worker) has never met the child. The child's situation and needs are handled through the parents. This may be a reasonable or it may result in a poor help to the child. A description of the children as they are characterized by their mothers and a

description of how the mother experiences the job of bringing up the child may help to find an answer to the question of the necessity of a face to face contact between the child and the professional helper in order to find the right preventive efforts.

## **2. Formulation of the problem**

Thus the aim of the paper may be formulated as an answer to the following three questions:

1. Will families with contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child differ from other families with children of the same age on a list of psychological or social problems (psycho-social problems)?
2. Will children from families with contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child differ from other children at the same age in their behaviour as described by their mothers?
3. Will the mother's opinion of how easy or difficult the child is to rear differ in families respectively with or without contact the social service department because of problems related to the child?

## **3. Methods**

The results to be presented are from the first two data collections (1996 and 1999) in a prospective longitudinal study of more than five thousand children from a random sample of children born in 1995. In both data collections the mothers were interviewed in their homes by an interviewer from the survey department of the Danish National Institute of Social Research. In addition the fathers in 1996 filled out a written questionnaire (Nygaard Christoffersen, 1997; Christensen, 2000).

A total of 5,998 families were contacted in 1996 and 5,429 joined, the response rate was 91 percent. In 1999 the original 5,998 families were contacted again. This time 5,288 families accepted to join, this is 88 percent of the original chosen. A total of 4,991 families took part in both data collections, 438 families from the first data collection did not take part in the second and 297 families who did not join the first data collection took part in the second.

This presentation includes families in which the mothers were interviewed in both data collections (excluding a few families where the father was interviewed instead of the mother).

This means that the sample to be analysed consists of a total of 4,818 families and children. All the children are born in autumn 1995. At the time for the second data collection in 1999 the children were 3½ years old. The results will be presented in tables showing distributions and correlation (chi 2 test).

## 4. Results

A total of 277 (6 percent) of the included families have had a contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child. It could be problems like a demand for counselling, for special day-care facilities used as help for families at risk, for home-visits from a professional person, or for a paid secondary family for the child<sup>1</sup>.

In the following analyses the sample is divided into two sections: the 277 (6 percent) of the families *with contact* to the social service department because of problems related to the children and the 4,541 (94 percent) of the families *without contact*.

### Families with psychological or social problems

Table 1 shows a list of 12 different psychosocial problems that the families may suffer from. The table shows the distribution (percent and number) of the different problems in the total sample.

TABLE 1

The most common problems in the total sample is that mother characterises the family's economy as "not good". This means that the family have less money than what they feel is needed, but only 4 percent characterises the economy as "very bad". Another common problem is mothers and fathers without vocational training or mothers or fathers unemployed for at least a period of the year 1998. It is also seen that family discord influences 40 percent of the families in 1996 and only 10 percent in 1999.

TABLE 2

Table 2 shows the same problems with the focus on the distribution among families respectively with or without contact to the social service department. Families with contact to the social service department tend more often to be families where the mother and/or the father have emotional problems, families with a poor economy, with mother unemployed and with a mother and/or a father without vocational training. Furthermore they will to a higher extend be families with single mothers. All the mentioned problems have a mutual correlation.

To sum up the results are that families with contact to the social service department compared to families without contact are families with:

1. Less emotional or psychological resources
2. Less economical resources
3. Less educational resources

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<sup>1</sup> Families who receive service from the social service department because of difficulties related to the child's mental or physical handicap are excluded from the special studied group of families having contact to the social department because of problems related to the child (getting help because of a child's mental or physical handicap is regarded as another problem than the problem to be explored in this paper).

### **The child's behaviour**

In 1999 the mothers were asked to characterise their child's behaviour on 40 items. The items describe the child on four behavioural themes: social behaviour, antisocial behaviour, attention, and anxiety/withdrawal (Christensen, 2000). The descriptions of social and antisocial behaviour mirrors each other, therefore in the following the characterisation of social behaviour is not included. The items and the questionnaire are inspired from several other studies of children (Rutter, 1967; Behar & Stringfield, 1974; Weir & Duveen, 1981; Tremblay, 1987 and 1991; Pagani et al. 1997; Richman & Graham, 1971).

#### TABLE 3

Table 3 shows the distribution in the total sample of 10 items concerning *antisocial behaviour*. And table 4 shows the same items and the distributions of answers in families with and without contact to the social service department.

#### TABLE 4

The most significant differences are found in the items "*bullies other children*" and "*hits other children*"; both behaviours are significantly more often found in families with contact to the social service department.

#### TABLE 5

Table 5 shows the distribution in the total sample of nine items concerning *attention*. And table 6 shows the distributions of the same items in families with or without contact to the social service department.

#### TABLE 6

Except for the item concerning concentration when watching children's television, the children in families with contact to the social service department have more problems related to attention than children in families without contact. The most significant differences are found on items "*can't sit still, is restless or hyperactive*" and "*fidgets*".

#### TABLE 7

Table 7 shows the distribution in the total sample of 10 items concerning *anxiety/withdrawal*. And table 8 shows the same items and the distribution of answers in families with or without contact to the social service department.

#### TABLE 8

Except for the items "*gives up easily*", "*is worried*" and "*is afraid of new situations/experiences*" the children in families with contact to the social service department have more problems related to anxiety/withdrawal than children in families without contact. The most significant differences are found on items "*is fearful or anxious*", "*seems to be unhappy or sad*" and "*withdraw from others*". All together this indicates that the children may have

mental or emotional problems and that they may have more depressive reactions than their peers.

To sum up the result is a description of children in families with contact to the social service department compared to children from families without contact as children with

4. More conflicts in contact with their peers
5. More attention-related problems
6. Less emotional or psychological resources

### **Child rearing**

Table 9 shows the distribution of families respectively with or without contact to the social service department and respectively where the mothers consider the child to be easy, often difficult or always difficult to rear. In the total sample most mothers consider their child as easy to rear.

#### TABLE 9

Table 10 shows the same questions with the distribution of mothers who find the child easy, often difficult or always difficult to rear in the two groups of families respectively with or without contact to the social service department. This table shows that problems in child rearing are significantly more common in families with contact to the social service department than in families without contact.

To sum up the result is a description of families with contact to the social service department as families where

7. The mothers experiences more trouble in child rearing

## **5. Summary and discussion**

The seven statements mentioned above may now answer the three questions that formulated the problem.

- A. Families with contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child differ from other families with children of the same age in three of the examined areas. They have less emotional and psychological resources, less economical resources and less educational resources.
- B. Children from families with contact to the social service department because of problems related to the child differ from other children at the same age in their behaviour. They have more conflicts in contact with their peers, more attention-related problems and less emotional or psychological resources.
- C. The mother's opinion of how easy or difficult the child is to rear differs in families respectively with or without contact the social service department because of problems

related to the child. In families with contact to the social service department the mother experiences more trouble in child rearing.

All together we get a picture of children from families within contact to the social service department as children who live in families with less emotional/psychological, economical and educational resources than what would be expected in an average family with a three-year-old child.

In addition the children themselves have more problems than what would be expected. The children often have conflicts with their peers; have more attention-related problems and more emotional problems. Even this is not true for all children in families with contact to the social service department there is a significant correlation. This gives cause for a hypothesis of conflict being a major theme in the children's lives so far. A hypothesis that will get attention also in the next data collection, which is planned to take place in 2003.

### **Reservation**

The children are characterised by their mothers. Evidently this involves a risk that mothers with emotional problems themselves may tend to describe more problems on behalf of their children, thus the result may to some extent reflect the situation of the mother (even this may be most true in the case of anxiety/withdrawal items).

Still the results are important in the way that they attract attention to the child's own situation. The children have problems of their own. Conflicts with peers and/or attention related problems are very destructive to the relations to other people. Therefore more focus on the child itself and more knowledge of the child's situation and on a description of the child's behaviour will probably be very helpful to find the best methods to prevent further problems.

### **Closing remarks**

The results show that children from families with contact to the social service department tend to have a more difficult daily life than what is found in general for three-year-old children. Results from contemporary Danish research (Egelund, 1997; Hestbæk, 1997; Christensen, 1998) show that the social service departments primarily focus on helping the parents (if we help the parent, we help the child). Thus the question to be raised is whether this kind of help is good enough from the perspective of the child.

The results point out that it is not sufficient to concentrate on the parents and to try to help them in order to enable them to help their children. It is important at the same time to have a direct focus on the possibility of severe problems in child rearing and to have a direct focus on the children themselves. The children in families with contact to the social service department may have too many conflicts because of antisocial behaviour, they may have severe attention related problems or they may be mildly or severely depressed.

This means that a new field of problems is to be confronted if the social service department has to fulfil the intention in the social legislation. It is needed to develop (better) methods of a preventive effort to secure the child's well being, health and development, as well as new and more comprehensive or concentrated efforts are to be used.



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**Table 1.****Families with psychosocial problems**

A total of 13 different psychosocial problems are listed separately. Percentage.

	Percentage of families influenced	Number of families influenced	Number of all families who answered the question
Mother has emotional problems	10	491	4,816
Father has emotional problems (2)	13	619	4,818
Mother has been hospitalised (physical illness, for a shorter a longer period during last 3 years)	12	591	4,818
Father has been hospitalised (physical illness, for a shorter a longer period during last 3 years) (2)	10	450	4,401
Mother unemployed 1998 (for a shorter or longer period)	20	958	4,818
Father unemployed 1998 (for a shorter or longer period) (1)	7	338	4,818
Mother without vocational education	19	892	4,817
Father without vocational education (1)	25	1198	4,818
Mother characterises the family's economy as "not good" (1999)	29	1374	4,818
Mother single at birth (1996)	3	164	4,817
Mother single breadwinner in 1999	8	407	4,817
Familiar discord, 1996	40	1,934	4,818
Familiar discord, 1999	10	500	4,818

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1 Information from the mother. Also information concerning non-cohabiting fathers.

2 Information from the mother, primarily information concerning cohabiting fathers.

**Table 2.****Families with psychosocial problems distributed on their contact to social services department (because of problems related to the child).**

Percentage of families with or without psychosocial problems, who have had or have not had contact to the social service department. 13 different psychosocial problems are listed separately.

		With contact to soc dep	Without contact to soc dep	Pct. Sum	Number	Chi 2
Mother has emotional problems	Yes	12	88	100	491	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	4,325	
Farther has emotional problems (3)	Yes	9	91	100	619	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	4,199	
Mother has been hospitalised (physical illness, for a shorter a longer period during last 3 years)	Yes	6	94	100	591	-
	No	6	94	100	4,227	
Father has been hospitalised (physical illness, for a shorter a longer period during last 3 years) (2)	Yes	6	94	100	450	-
	No	5	95	100	3,951	
Mother unemployed 1998 (for a shorter or longer period)	Yes	8	92	100	958	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	3,860	
Father unemployed 1998 (for a shorter or longer period) (1)	Yes	7	93	100	338	-
	No	6	94	100	4,480	
Mother without vocational education	Yes	10	90	100	892	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	4,817	
Father without vocational education (1)	Yes	11	89	100	1,198	P<0,001
	No	4	96	100	3,620	
Mother characterises the family's economy as "not good" (1999)	Yes	9	91	100	1,374	P<0,001
	No	4	96	100	3,444	
Mother single at birth (1996)	Yes	17	83	100	164	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	4,653	
Mother single breadwinner in 1999	Yes	17	83	100	407	P<0,001
	No	5	95	100	4,410	
Familiar discord, 1996	Yes	6	94	100	1,934	-
	No	5	95	100	2,884	
Familiar discord, 1999	Yes	7	93	100	500	-
	No	6	94	100	4,318	

1 Information received from the mothers, also information concerning non-cohabiting fathers.

2 Information received from the mothers, primarily information concerning cohabiting fathers.

**Table 3.****Antisocial behaviour.**

Mother's characterisation of the three-year-old on items describing antisocial behaviour. Percentage. Number 4,818.

	<i>Often or very true</i>	<i>Sometimes or somewhat true</i>	<i>Never or not true</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Sum</i>
Will only join in common play if he can decide what to play	3	13	82	2	100
Pushes others to get what he wants	11	37	48	4	100
Takes things away from others when they won't give it to him	12	50	37	1	100
Starts quarrelling with other children	9	44	43	4	100
Bullies other children	9	46	42	3	100
Hits other children	3	32	63	2	100
Has temper tantrums	18	46	36	0	100
Has a hot temper	23	40	37	0	100
Does not care if told off	6	17	77	0	100
Does not seem to feel guilty after misbehaving	7	19	74	1	101

**Table 4.****Families with contact to social services department distributed on statements of antisocial behaviour.**

Mother's characterisation of the three-year-old on items describing antisocial behaviour in families, who have had or have not had contact to the social services department. Percentage.

		Often or very true	Sometimes or somewhat true	Never or not true	Don't know	Sum	Number	Chi 2	DF
Will only join in common play if he can decide what to play	Cont	3	15	79	4	101	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	3	13	83	2	101	4,537		
Pushes others to get what he wants	Cont	16	38	44	2	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	11	37	49	4	101	4,527		
Takes things away from others when they won't give it to him	Cont	17	52	31	0	100	276	P<0.05	3
	No cont	12	50	37	1	100	4,538		
Starts quarrelling with other children	Cont	12	45	40	3	100	277	-	
	No cont	9	44	43	4	100	4,535		
Bullies other children	Cont	12	53	34	1	100	276	P<0.01	3
	No cont	9	46	43	3	101	4,536		
Hits other children	Cont	5	40	53	1	99	277	P<0.001	3
	No cont	3	32	64	2	101	4,528		
Has temper tantrums	Cont	22	47	31	0	100	277	-	
	No cont	18	46	36	0	100	4,534		
Has a hot temper	Cont	29	40	31	0	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	22	40	37	0	99	4,540		
Does not care if told off	Cont	9	21	70	0	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	6	17	77	0	100	4,540		
Does not seem to feel guilty after misbehaving	Cont	8	22	70	1	101	276	-	
	No cont	7	19	74	1	100	4,538		

**Table 5.****Attention.**

Mother's characterisation of the three-year-old on items describing attention. Percentage. Number 4,818.

	Often or very true	Sometimes or some-what true	Never or not true	Don't know	Sum
Can concentrate 10-15 minutes on a read aloud story.	79	14	6	0	99
Can concentrate 10-15 minutes on children's television.	89	7	3	0	99
Can't sit still, is restless or hyperactive	8	25	68	0	101
Is distractible, has trouble sticking to any activity	8	35	57	1	101
Fidgets	1	8	91	0	100
Cannot settle to anything for more than a few moments	4	9	87	0	100
Is impulsive acts without thinking	18	48	32	2	100
Has difficulty awaiting turns in games	21	41	36	3	101
Is inattentive	2	19	78	1	100

**Table 6.****Attention.**

Mother's characterisation of the three-year-old on items describing attention in families, who have had or have not had contact to the social service department. Percentage.

		Often or very true	Sometimes or somewhat true	Never or not true	Don't know	Sum	Number	Chi 2	DF
Can concentrate 10-15 minutes on a read aloud story.	Cont	74	15	10	1	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	80	14	6	0	100	4,540		
Can concentrate 10-15 minutes on children's television.	Cont	88	8	4	0	100	277	-	
	No cont	89	7	3	0	99	4,539		
Can't sit still, is restless or hyperactive	Cont	15	29	56	0	100	277	P<0.001	3
	No cont	7	24	68	0	99	4,537		
Is distractible, has trouble sticking to any activity	Cont	12	35	52	0	99	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	8	35	57	0	100	4,538		
Fidgets	Cont	2	16	82	0	100	277	P<0.001	3
	No cont	1	7	91	0	99	4,536		
Cannot settle to anything for more than a few moments	Cont	6	13	81	0	100	277	P<0.01	2
	No cont	4	8	88	0	100	4,538		
Is impulsive acts without thinking	Cont	20	44	34	2	100	277	-	
	No cont	18	48	32	2	100	4,540		
Has difficulty awaiting turns in games	Cont	28	39	31	2	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	20	41	36	3	100	4,540		
Is inattentive	Cont	3	25	70	2	100	277	P<0.01	3
	No cont	2	19	79	1	101	4,532		

**Table 7.****Anxiety/withdrawal.**

Mother's characterization of the three-year-old on items describing anxiety/withdrawal. Percentage. Number 4,818.

	Often or very true	Sometimes or some-what true	Never or not true	Don't know	Sum
Gives up easily	4	27	68	1	100
Is fearful or anxious	1	12	87	0	100
Seems to be unhappy or sad	0	4	96	0	100
Is worried	0	5	95	0	100
Is nervous high-strung or tense	0	2	98	0	100
Is afraid of new situations/experiences	4	36	61	0	101
Suffers from nightmares	2	22	75	1	100
Has troubles in having confidence in himself	1	13	85	1	100
Withdraw from others	1	8	91	0	100
Stares into space	1	9	90	0	100



**Table 8.****Contact to social service department and anxiety/withdrawal.**

Mother's characterization of the three-year-old on items describing anxiety / withdrawal in families, who respectively have had or have not had contact to the social service department. Percentage.

		Often or very true	Sometimes or somewhat true	Never or not true	Don't know	Sum	Number	Chi 2	DF
Gives up easily	Cont	4	27	68	1	100	277	-	
	No cont	4	27	68	1	100	4,538		
Is fearful or anxious	Cont	1	18	79	1	99	277	P<0.001	3
	No cont	1	12	87	0	100	4,540		
Seems to be unhappy or sad	Cont	0	10	90	0	100	277	P<0.001	3
	No cont	0	4	96	0	100	4,539		
Is worried	Cont	0	7	93	0	100	276	-	
	No cont	0	5	94	0	99	4,532		
Is nervous high-strung or tense	Cont	0	5	95	0	100	277	P<0.01	3
	No cont	0	2	98	0	100	4,538		
Is afraid of new situations/experiences	Cont	5	38	57	0	100	277	-	
	No cont	4	35	61	0	100	4,538		
Suffers from nightmares	Cont	3	26	70	0	99	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	2	22	75	1	100	4,539		
Has troubles in having confidence in himself	Cont	3	13	82	3	101	276	P<0.05	3
	No cont	1	13	85	1	100	4,533		
Withdraw from others	Cont	2	11	86	1	100	276	P<0.001	3
	No cont	1	8	92	0	101	4,523		
Stares into space	Cont	2	11	87	0	100	277	P<0.05	3
	No cont	1	9	90	0	100	4,538		

**Table 9.****Childrearing.**

Distribution of families respectively with or without contact to the social service department and respectively where the mother considers the child as easy, often difficult or always difficult to rear. Percentage.

	The child is easy to rear	The child is often difficult to rear	The child is always difficult to rear	Total percentage	Number
With contact to social service department	4	1	1	6	277
Without contact to social service department	75	15	4	94	4,540
Total percentage	79	16	5	100	
Number	3,800	775	234		4,817

**Table 10.**

**Contact to social service department and child rearing.**

Percentage of families with or without contact to social service department, where the mother considers the child as easy, often difficult or always difficult to rear.

	The child is easy to rear	The child is often difficult to rear	The child is always difficult to rear	Total percentage	Number	Chi 2
With contact to social service department	70	20	10	100	277	P<0.001
Without contact to social service department	79	16	4	99	4,540	