

Children are Sweden's top priority [UK] ^[1]

Health, BBC News

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EXCERPTS

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At quarter to midnight, Asa gives birth to a healthy baby boy. Everything went well.

But had there been complications doctors and a fully equipped operating theatre were just down the corridor.

This is childbirth in Sweden, the safest place in the world to be born - fewer children die here under the age of five than in any other country.

For Sweden, the figure is three deaths per 1,000 children, compared to six per 1,000 in the UK, and 270 per 1,000 in Sierra Leone, which has the highest child mortality rate in the world.

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All-round care

So what are the factors which set Sweden apart from other developed countries in terms of child safety?

Medical staff at the hospital told me that the quality of ante-natal and post-natal care was very high.

Almost 100% of mothers give birth in hospital - home births are not encouraged.

The maternity units are large and modern.

But it is about more than just buildings and staff. It has something to do with Swedish society and the way parents and small children are given the highest priority.

Take for example, parental leave.

Swedish parents get 480 days off after the birth of a child. Most of it is on 80% of normal pay, but many employers top that up to 90%.

Each parent must take 60 days, but how they divide the remaining 360 is up to them.

And the time off is valid until the child is eight years old.

I went back to see Asa and Par the day after their son was born.

They had been transferred to a family post-natal room (again with beds for mother and father) and Asa was cradling their son, Viktor in her arms.

Subsidised nurseries

Asa told me she would take the first few months off: "I'll be breast feeding, which obviously Per can't help with, but after seven months then he will step in and take some time off.

"One of us will be at home for around 18 months".

Per added: "It's very important to be there when he is young, so that he has a role model. I'd miss a lot if I wasn't there."

When Viktor is around 18 months old he'll go into one of the many state-subsidised nurseries.

The fees are capped, to make them affordable to everyone.

One of the senior obstetricians at the Karolinska University Hospital said there was something special about Sweden which made it a great place for families: "Swedish society is very cohesive and there isn't a huge gap between rich and poor.

"Society has given a lot of support for parents for decades."

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'Easy for parents'

Anthony is British and used to live in London. The family have been in Sweden for four years and now have two young children.

"Everything is easy here for parents," Anthony said.

"My brother has two children in England and there's a huge contrast between the ordered, logical system here regarding immunisations and child health checks and the one in Britain, where no-one seems to know what is happening.

"My brother got about 10 days off when his children were born.

"Here you get to share a year and a half.

"People in England can't believe it when I tell them.

"You often see men with pushchairs in the street and it's common for fathers to take six months off."

After having three children myself in the UK, I looked with admiration and a little envy at the lot of fathers in Sweden.

I have no doubt that many employers find it an incredible burden having to do without staff for months on end.

But as a parent, Sweden seems the perfect place to have children.

- reprinted from BBC News

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