



# Children in Norway

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**A**VISITOR IN OSLO FOR THE NORWEGIAN NATIONAL HOLIDAY ON MAY 17, 1994, Jimmy Carter praised the Norwegian celebration. As a guest at such festivities in more than one hundred nations, Carter had seen none celebrate its national day like Norway. When he saw the center of the city filled with children carrying Norwegian flags and forming a parade to pass by the royal palace, he was not only moved but surprised. "I saw tens of thousands of children marching by me—and in their eyes I could see that they had hope and confidence in their future in their own nation," said the former American president.<sup>1</sup>

Is it really the case that children in Norway grow up with "hope and confidence in their future"? In this article I want to take a brief look at how things actually are for children in Norway and to touch on matters I take to be typically Norwegian and important for growing children.

## I. CHILDREN IN A CHANGING CULTURE

For a long period Norwegian culture has been quite homogeneous. Although it is a long way from the south to the north of Norway, the country has only 4.2 million inhabitants, about a quarter of whom are under eighteen. Many years of social-democratic rule have also contributed to a national commonality. There is public school for all and approximately 90% belong to the state church.

Until very recently Norway had only one radio station and one television channel, both without advertising. All of Norway had "something in common" on

<sup>1</sup>Oslo *Dagbladet*, May 19, 1994.

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radio and television, and Norwegian State Broadcasting (*Norsk Rikskringkasting* or NRK) has been committed to programming that would highlight Norwegian culture. Programs for children as well as adults made use of many Norwegian authors, including classical writers as well as more modern writers. Until the development of television in the 1960s children in Norway sat in front of the radio on Saturday afternoons and listened to "The Children's Hour." Today little children watch "Children's Television" every day. NRK has maintained a high standard for these programs: "Programs shall reflect the reality of the Norwegian child's life and convey attitudes based on the culture and basic values of our society."<sup>2</sup>

Now, however, most people in Norway can get many other channels, both on radio and television, and this has undoubtedly influenced the culture of both the family and the society as a whole. Moreover, Norwegians now travel more than they did previously and are thus influenced by the cultures, religions, and attitudes of other nations. Immigrants, whom the late King Olav called "our new compatriots," have also brought their own cultures and religions to Norway.<sup>3</sup> Norwegians have also become more aware of an "old" minority in Norway, the *Sami* and their culture. But perhaps more influential than any other factor is that the world has grown smaller as it comes into our living rooms through television. Films from abroad, not least those from Hollywood, have also altered the Norwegian culture. Ideals, heroes and heroines, and language have gradually changed character. Commercial interest in children has also influenced the culture.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in recent years the culture as a whole has become more pluralistic and secularized.

Traditionally the home has been a place of stability. On the farms children had father and mother near at hand. In urban families the mother usually worked at home and the father worked outside of the home. There was always an adult available when a child needed one. Things are quite different now. Today most parents work outside of the home. According to statistics, 43 percent of marriages end in divorce. Approximately every fifth family with children has only one person to provide for it, and nine out of ten of these are women. Eight of ten single mothers are in the work force. No fathers work more overtime than the fathers of small children, and for many parents time is budgeted very tightly. Many children lack the close, sustaining presence of parents.<sup>5</sup> The Red Cross and Save the Children have established hotlines for children. They report lonely children who say that parents, and especially fathers, give them little time.

School days are increasingly long and after-school activities are becoming more common for children whose parents work outside the home. Many parents

<sup>2</sup>Karin Hake, *Fjernsynsbarn* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1993) 21.

<sup>3</sup>It is a new experience for Norway to receive immigrants, and this has unfortunately evoked xenophobia. King Olav considered it appropriate to speak of the matter of immigrants in an address at a dinner for members of parliament in October 1987, although many considered it a political matter in which the king ought not to have involved himself.

<sup>4</sup>Kari Berggren, *Etter skoletid*, Rapport nr. 12 (Trondheim: NAVF's Senter for Barneforskning, 1987) 33.

<sup>5</sup>Christian W. Beck, *Det organiserte vanvidd* (Vallset: Oplandske Bokforlag, 1990) 18.

want their children to use their free time in organized activities like athletics, musical organizations, etc., so they are involved in such activities every free afternoon and evening as well as holidays. Eighty percent of children from ages nine to thirteen are involved in one or more of these activities. Sixty-nine percent participate in an athletic organization. Twenty-seven percent are in a choir or orchestra and eighty percent play an instrument.<sup>6</sup>

Many fear that the unique culture of children will disappear as a result of all this organization. The unique culture of children is constituted by the cultural process and the cultural products that children have in common without the interference of adults. Through the interpretation of these expressions of the child's culture we can discover something about the perspectives and experiences of children.<sup>7</sup>

This is the phenomenon that distinguishes the child's culture: the ability to approach problems without surrendering one's self. Through sayings, jingles, rules, and prescribed actions children communicate feelings they might not otherwise be able to express. Thus they hide themselves behind 'rituals.' These are the artistic forms of expression that save them from what can almost be considered crises, though they seem but bagatelles to adults.<sup>8</sup>

The child's culture is a living folk culture. Will this child's culture survive? That will depend on how adults order the society. Adults, in fact, are on the way to taking time and space for play away from children. Norwegian children still, however, enjoy a good deal of freedom. Up to the present, Norwegian parents have not had to be afraid of allowing children to play without supervision in the neighborhoods, in the forests, in the cities, etc. There has been relatively little violence in Norway, although it is unfortunately increasing.

The structure and size of the family is changing in ways important for children. Families with large numbers of children are rare these days. Many children are alone at home and families rarely have more than two children, and therefore the child's culture is not passed on as easily from the elder siblings or older companions in play. For the most part children are with those of their own ages because schools and preschools are divided this way.

The society has also become more mobile. Due to circumstances in the labor market, many have moved from their home towns. This means that many children are deprived of close contact with their grandparents, who have often been the mediators of the classical folk culture, the ones who tell stories from the old days and who read and sing and play with grandchildren. Grandparents often have more time than parents, and children need this classical culture which is valuable in and of itself and a good basis upon which children can build their own culture.

Finding joy in nature is a special trait of Norwegian culture. Norwegians

<sup>6</sup>Marianne Borgen, ed., *Fakta om barn og unge* (Oslo: Barneombudet, 1992) 110-123.

<sup>7</sup>Ivar Selmer-Olson, *Barn inntil og de voksne* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1990) 9.

<sup>8</sup>Åse Enerstvedt as quoted in Ivar Selmer-Olson, *Boksen går* (Trondheim: Nork Kulturråd og Norsk Senter for Barneforskning, 1990) 16.

greatly enjoy hiking and simply being outdoors. The parents of little children trundle them outdoors to sleep even in the cold of winter, and parents teach their children to ski and skate and swim at an early age. A Sunday outing for the whole family on foot or on skis is typically Norwegian.<sup>9</sup> Very fond of hiking in the mountains, Queen Sonja put the following question in a speech at the opening of the "Outdoor Year" in 1993: "What is it that entices and draws and brings one to endure days of fog, rain, blisters, weary shoulders and feet?" Research on the outdoor habits of Norwegians shows that the quiet and peace of nature are what most beckon Norwegians to the mountains. Being in the freshness of nature, away from noise and pollution, crowds and stress, are also mentioned as important reasons.<sup>10</sup> Many prefer to spend a Sunday outdoors rather than to go to church. Some say that here they think of God, and the experience of nature is for many Norwegians a religious one.

## II. CHURCH, STATE, AND CHILDREN

Norway passed a law on children and parents in 1981. The guiding principle is the welfare of the child. The law declares that the interest of children shall take priority over the interest of others if there is a conflict of interests. "The authority of parents," for example, here becomes "the responsibility of parents."<sup>11</sup> Parental physical or psychological violence against children is absolutely prohibited. It is consequently forbidden to strike children in Norway. Another law, the so-called "Childcare Law," assures the right of children to care and upbringing if their parents default on or abuse their responsibility. The public authorities, represented by the official childcare, can thus remove from parents the responsibility for children if they find this in the child's best interests. Nevertheless the rights of parents in Norway are so strongly embedded that it is difficult to intervene. Many believe that the public authorities should intervene more often.

Norway in 1981 was the first nation in the world to establish a public ombudsman for children. Together with a council of advisers the children's ombudsman is "responsible for seeing to it that the needs, rights, and interests of children are accounted for throughout the whole society."<sup>12</sup> The children's ombudsman is to be a "watchdog" for the best interests of children. A telephone line has been organized called "Straight Reporting." Children throughout the country use this line to report matters they think the children's ombudsman ought to work on. NRK has established a program, "Straight Reporting," in which the children's ombudsman responds to a selection of incidents reported.

Finally, on January 8, 1991, Norway ratified the United Nations' convention on the rights of children, although in many respects the Norwegian legal structure provides better protection for children than does the United Nations' document.

<sup>9</sup>Ivar Frønes, *Den norske barndommen* (Oslo: Cappelen/NFU, 1989).

<sup>10</sup>Oslo *Vårt Land*, July 16, 1994.

<sup>11</sup>Lucy Smith, "Foreldrenes rett over barna, barnas rett over seg selv," *Barndom i Norge*, ed. Arne Solli (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1991) 56.

<sup>12</sup>M. Borgen, *Fakta*, 134.

Good legislation does not always function well in practice. It is essential to follow up on intentions through political priorities and further action.<sup>13</sup> Norway, therefore, has a department of government for children and the family. Its intention is to draw more attention to children and families in the political arena. Of legal provisions in the best interests of children, the following may be mentioned:

- birth control from physicians is free
- parents are granted 52 weeks leave in connection with pregnancy and birth; national insurance pays eighty percent of the parents' salaries
- new mothers are permitted to nurse during working hours and can have an hour's shorter working day
- when children are sick, parents are allowed up to ten days every year away from work with full pay, up to the child's twelfth year; single parents are allowed twenty days off
- children have free dental care until they are eighteen as well as free medical care and hospitalization
- health care agencies ordinarily take charge of monitoring and vaccinations through childhood; nurses and doctors also maintain offices in the schools
- parties to divorce must submit to obligatory arbitration if they have children under sixteen; the intention is to secure good arrangements for custody and visitation

In Norway children have nine years of obligatory education, with elementary schools for the first six grades and junior high schools for the seventh through ninth grades. Up to now children have enrolled after reaching the age of seven. Parliament has now ordered that children begin at age six and that public school continue for ten years. Further education is voluntary, although students have the right to three more years of general or vocational education. Instruction is free in both the public schools and universities. There are very few private schools (1.4% of elementary and junior high schools).

Historically the Church of Norway is a Lutheran state- and folk-church closely related to the public schools. The public schools of Norway were established in 1739 to provide instruction in reading in order to make it possible to study the Bible and the catechism. Today instruction in Christianity in the public schools is not formally regarded as the church's own instruction of the baptized, although to a certain degree it continues to function as such. At present, the public schools are governed by a statement of Christian intentions.<sup>14</sup> This means that Christian attitudes and a Christian ethic permeate all instruction. The public schools provide for specific instruction

<sup>13</sup>Redd Barna, *Barnekonvensjonen; Rettigheter for barn i Norge* (Oslo: Tano, 1993) 7.

<sup>14</sup>*Lov om grunnskolen*, Paragraph 1, Purpose: "The public schools shall in understanding with and in collaboration with the home contribute toward giving students a Christian and moral nurture, develop their capacities both spiritually and physically and provide them with good basic knowledge so that they can become productive and independent persons in the home and society. The school shall promote spiritual freedom and tolerance and shall stress the creation of good social relations between teachers and students and between school and home." Quoted from *Læreplan for grunnskole...Generell del* (Oslo: Det kongelige kirke-utdannings- og forskningsdepartement, 1993).

in Christianity from a Lutheran point of view. There is provision for requests to be exempted from such instruction. In recent years schools have included instruction in "worldviews" as an alternative to instruction in Christianity. Most students, however, continue to receive instruction in Christianity.

For a long while little attention was paid to the building of preschools. As late as 1970 there was room for as little as two percent of all children in preschool. But in the course of just a few years attitudes toward preschool changed. From being a place of resort for children who could not be at home, it came to be regarded as a good pedagogical device to which all children have a right. As a result of this, congregations and Christian organizations opened a number of preschools. This resulted in a broadened statement of Christian intentions. In 1991, thirty-nine percent of children were enrolled in preschool and the number of preschools, both public and private, continues to grow. It is, however, probable that there are as many children in day care as in preschool.

The Institute for Christian Nurture (*Institutt for Kristen Oppsæding* or IKO), concerned with religious-pedagogical matters since 1945, has in recent years worked with the matter of preschool instruction both through the publication of plans and in the development of material and courses. Plans for schools and preschools developed in recent years have emphasized the child's milieu. The church is a part of this milieu and collaboration among the school, preschool, and church is in many instances working well. It is customary for school children to visit the church for school services before Christmas and the summer holiday. Preschools now follow this tradition. Classes from the schools visit the church to learn about the church and the work that goes on there, and pastors in turn visit the schools and classes.

### III. MINISTRY TO CHILDREN IN THE CHURCH OF NORWAY

Approximately 85 percent of all Norwegian children are baptized in the Church of Norway and approximately eighty percent are confirmed at age 15. This indicates that the Church of Norway and Christianity continue to be important to the majority of Norwegians. At present pastors counsel parents prior to the baptism of children. Confirmation instruction later requires eight months. In some congregations little has been offered to youngsters between baptism and confirmation. On a national basis approximately ten percent of children take part in Sunday schools or other youth work conducted by other organizations including the Scouts, the YMCA and YWCA, and mission organizations.

In November 1991 the church assembly approved a plan for the education of the baptized in the Church of Norway. Through this action the church assembly instructed the congregations to give high priority to this effort in the coming years. The education of the baptized is therefore task number one in the Church of Norway at the moment; throughout the country local congregations are busy planning their efforts toward the education of the baptized. People are assessing local resources and putting local plans in place. In many congregations this has

aroused considerable enthusiasm and creativity, while others despair of getting things underway as they wish.

The education of the baptized is directed toward children from infancy to age 15, the time of confirmation. The intention is for children "to live with Christ as they grow up, just as they were united with him in baptism." This means that:

- the child will learn to know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- the child will be helped to live as Christian in renunciation of the devil and faith in Christ, in worship and service<sup>15</sup>

To these ends the plan is comprehensive and focused. The focus is on recommended methods and contents for all baptized children. In addition there are continuous activities that ordinarily occur in an environment the child experiences as secure and stable.

The home, of course, is the important place for these continuing efforts in education. Here the plan envisions "the development of good traditions for ordinary use: table prayer, Bible stories, Christian songs, and evening prayer; the creation of traditions for baptismal days and festivals." Further, gatherings in the congregation for worship and other occasions, Sunday school, choir, organized youth groups, preschool, and school are to play a role in continuing education.

It is difficult to reach all the children of each congregation, which covers a stated geographical area, with good offerings all the time. Although very few belong to other denominations (5.4%), those who belong to congregations of the Norwegian folk church are not accustomed to going to church other than on special occasions: Christmas eve, baptism, confirmation, marriage, burial. If they are to come to church, occasions must be created. Therefore certain efforts have been directed toward specific times, and these are the focus of the plan for the education of the baptized. It is expected that all baptized children will take part. They focus on:

Infancy to age 3:	baptismal instruction of parents; written greetings on baptismal days
Age 4:	worship and 3 or 4 meetings; distribution of the <i>Church Book</i> for 4-year-olds
Age 6:	baptismal school with 1-2 worship services and 7-10 meetings
Age 8:	visit to the church; celebration of thanksgiving for the fall harvest
Age 10-11:	worship and 3 or 4 meetings; distribution of Bibles
Age 13:	celebration of Pentecost; worship

Material supporting this plan has been and continues to be put out regularly. The

<sup>15</sup>*Plan for dåpsopplæring i Den norske Kirke* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 1992) 21.

books most widely used up to this point have been *The Child in Our Hands*,<sup>16</sup> distributed in conjunction with baptism, and *The Children's Church Book*,<sup>17</sup> which 4-year-olds receive during the "Four-Year-Old's Worship Service." These reach approximately 60% of their age groups each year. In sum, the intention with this focus is to introduce children into Christian fellowship through continual efforts in the home, the church, the school, and the preschool.

In a doctoral thesis on the pedagogy of religion, Sigmund Harbo emphasizes that nothing is more decisive for the development of adult religious practice than the religious practice of the parents of a growing child.<sup>18</sup> An obvious question follows: How does the Christian tradition fare in Norwegian homes? Are the old traditions of evening prayer and table prayer on the way out? Pluralism and secularism have certainly gone far. Many young parents have few or no examples to follow from their own parents on how to give their own children a Christian upbringing. They bring their children to baptism but do not know how to follow up on the promises made at the baptismal font.

The Foundation for Baptismal Circles in the Home (*Stiftelsen Hjemmenes Dåpsring* or HD) was established in 1984 to support parents in the work of bringing up children. The most important result of this was the development of a pedagogical program for the family aimed at the first six years of life. Material for parents and children is packed in boxes and sent to homes on a subscription basis three times each year. Each box includes a guide for parents and material for the child: cassettes, Bible story books, pictures, games, arts and crafts materials. Guides for parents follow the ages of the child and include themes such as: security and confidence, created by God, setting boundaries, forgiveness, God's ways, when your child asks, etc. The authors of these guides, Professors Oddbjørn Evenshaug and Dag Hallen, say that no one is better suited to the raising of a child than that child's very own parents, and that parents need to be encouraged to rely on themselves and their own common sense.

It is great fun to receive a package at home. One important "person" in the event is the puppet Fidus (*fidus* = faith, trust). Fidus plays a role in skits and is portrayed in books and pictures. In addition to this, HD has produced a large version of Fidus for pastors and others to use during worship services and meetings at the church. This creates a sense of recognition for the child and, as a part of their efforts to educate the baptized, some congregations organized Fidus clubs for children and parents.

This whole program is known as *Tripp-trapp*, and is intended to support parents in their work of post-baptismal education in the home. Pastors frequently recommend *Tripp-trapp* during baptismal counseling and some congregations offer subscriptions. *Tripp-trapp* is currently being tested in congregations in the United States.

<sup>16</sup>Oddbjørn Evenshaug, Dag Hallen, Fred Riktor, *Barnet i våre hender* (Oslo: HD-forlaget, 1986).

<sup>17</sup>Eivind Skeie, *Barnas Kirkebok* (Oslo: IKO-Forlaget, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>Sigmund Harbo, *Barndomserfaringer og voksentro* (Oslo: Universitetesforlaget, 1989) 177.

On the occasion of the United Nations' Year of the Family in 1994, IKO and the Church Council of the Church of Norway have produced a resource booklet, *The Family in Focus*.<sup>19</sup> Here it is maintained that it is difficult to create a secure society for children and young people if their intimate relations in the family are unstable and insecure. It is a central contention of this booklet that the church has a responsibility for the whole family and the church is concerned with every aspect of family life. Great weight is placed on the importance of time together and cooperation and on the family in a generational and social context. In relation to children, responsibility for their upbringing begins with the parents' responsibility for their marriage. The family is a field of tension between the individual's own self-realization and responsibility for a common life. Following an era in which emphasis has been placed on the individual, many feel that it is time for a new solidarity in the family. The resource booklet, *The Family in Focus*, has frequently been used by congregations planning for the education of the baptized.

#### IV. HOPE AND CONFIDENCE IN THEIR FUTURE?

From this overview we might conclude that for the most part the future for children in Norway is good. Governmental authorities<sup>20</sup> and the church each offer various possibilities for children. Research demonstrates that among all Scandinavian children and youth, Norwegian youngsters are most likely to consider themselves flourishing and able to influence their daily lives.<sup>21</sup> The great quest for prosperity, however, has led to the "disintegration of the family and the bonds of kinship."<sup>22</sup> The chief threat to the good raising of children in Norway, I believe, is the weakening awareness on the part of parents and families of their responsibility for the coming generation. As important as it is for church, school, preschool, and other institutions of the society to intensify their efforts on behalf of children, we must realize that parents have the most formative influence in the upbringing of their children. For children in Norway it would be best if parents would place the highest priority on their own essential responsibility for their children.<sup>23</sup> The responsibility for post-baptismal education promised at the baptismal font is part and parcel of this.

<sup>19</sup>Jorun Elisabeth Berstad Weyde, ed., *Familien i Fokus* (Oslo: IKO-Forlaget, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>Barn og unge skal ha det godt i Norge! Regjeringens mål og innsats i barnepolitikken 1990-1993, 3. The state's primary goals for children are:

Children and youth shall be given a secure and healthy upbringing.

Children and youth shall be given help when they need it.

Children and youth must be permitted to develop.

Children and youth shall have their interests better considered.

Children and youth shall be permitted to participate in and exercise responsibility for society.

Children and youth shall develop more knowledge of and respect for nature, other cultures, and forms of society.

<sup>21</sup>Trond-Viggo Torgersen, *Bakgrunn for barneombudets arbeid, 1992-1997* (Oslo: Barneombudet, 1992) 14.

<sup>22</sup>Dag Hareide, *Det gode Norge* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1991) 109.

<sup>23</sup>A motto for the Year of the Child in 1994, created by the parents' organization *Mental Barnehjelp* is: "Think children when you make choices!"