



Photo: Colourbox

# 5. Building a Family and Living with Children in Sweden

## Contents

Different ways to live together

Looking after children and young people

Childcare

Compulsory school

Upper-secondary school

Schools and democracy

Financial support for families

# Different ways to live together

It is common in Sweden for couples to live together and have children before they get married. Many also choose not to marry. They live together as a cohabiting couple.

## Marriage

Everyone in Sweden must be 18 years old to get married. This is the law. The law applies to all people in Sweden, even if they are not Swedish citizens. There may be other rules in other countries, but Swedish authorities only approve foreign marriages if they comply with Swedish law.



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Before you get married, you have to apply for a consideration of impediments to marriage. This is a check to ensure that there is nothing to prevent you being able to get married. The consideration of impediments to marriage is performed by the Swedish Tax Agency in the county in which you are registered. If there are no impediments, you receive a certificate that is valid for four months. Give the certificate to the person who is officiating at your wedding. If you or the person you are marrying is not entered on the population register in Sweden, the consideration of impediments to marriage has to be performed in the country in which you or the other person is registered.

According to Swedish law, the following are impediments to marriage:

- if you or your partner are under the age of 18,
- if you are closely related to the person you want to marry,
- if you or your partner are already married, or are registered partners.

Swedish law also forbids forced marriage. This means that no one can force anyone else to marry. Everyone has the right to decide who they want to marry.

You always have the right to say no to getting married.

Swedish authorities can refuse to approve a foreign marriage if someone has been forced to marry.

A wedding is the ceremony when two people get married. A wedding can be religious or civil. For a wedding to be valid, it must be performed by a registered and approved celebrant. This can be a priest, imam or a registrar, for example. Civil marriages are performed by a person who has been appointed by the county administrative board. A civil marriage is a ceremony that is unconnected to any religion. If the wedding is a religious ceremony performed by a celebrant who does not have the right to solemnise marriages, the marriage is not official in the eyes of the law. For it to become official, a civil marriage is also required.

Marriage in Sweden is gender neutral. This means that two people of the same gender can get married in the same way as a woman and a man. A registrar may not say no if two people of the same gender want to get married. However, an officiant from a religious faith, e.g. a priest from the Church of Sweden, can choose whether to say yes or no. If a priest says no, you can ask a different priest.



Photo: Johnér

A law called the Marriage Code applies to those who are married. The Marriage Code contains rules about inheritance, with the surviving person in a marriage inheriting all assets, together with any children.

Read more about inheritance in Chapter 8.

## Cohabiting

When two people live together as a couple without being married, this is called cohabiting.

It is common for people to cohabit in Sweden and in the Nordic countries. It is also common to have children without being married. There is a law about cohabitation called the Cohabitants Act. The Cohabitants Act lays down rules about matters relating to cohabitants' homes and the items they own together. If one of the cohabitants dies, the other has the right to continue living in their shared home. The surviving cohabitant may also inherit their shared items in the home. In order to inherit other assets, e.g. money in the bank, a will must have been drawn up.

## Divorce

In Sweden you can divorce the person you are married to even if s/he does not want to. If you want to get divorced, you need to contact the district court in the municipality where you are registered and make a divorce application.

You and your husband/wife can fill in an application together. If you are not in agreement, you can apply for a divorce alone.

If you make a joint application and do not have any children, the district court can issue a judgement (a decision) as soon as possible. If you have children under the age of 16, or if one of you does not want to get divorced, you will be given time to consider your decision. This means that you have time to think about if you really want to get divorced. The time for consideration is at least six months and up to one year.

If you still want to get divorced after six months, you have to contact the district court yourself. This is known as going through with your divorce. If you do not submit a letter stating that you want to go through with your divorce, the district court will terminate your application and the divorce application will not be valid. If the district court believes

that one of you has been coerced into marriage (forced marriage), a divorce can be granted immediately, without time for consideration.

## Custody of children

Child custody means that the legal guardians, usually the parents, have legal responsibility for the child. This means that you have the right and the obligation to look after the child. The law states that children must have legal guardians until they are 18 years old. If your child is studying at the upper secondary level, you are obliged to guarantee his/her maintenance until s/he turns 21.

Joint custody means that both parents share responsibility for the child. They must make decisions relating to the child together. Both parents have the same obligations, even if they do not live together. If you are a legal guardian, you also have the right to receive information about your child. This means that you have the right to know things about your child concerning preschool, school, healthcare, social services, the police and other public authorities.

Sole custody means that only one of the parents has responsibility for the child and makes decisions concerning them. If you are married, you automatically have joint custody of your children. If you are not married, you must fill in a form at the social service administration (family law section) stating who the child's other parent is. You will then be given the option of registering joint custody.

If you are getting divorced and are not in agreement about who will have custody, you can contact the family law section. They can help you find a solution. If you do not come to an agreement, custody becomes a legal matter for the district court to rule on. The district court will then ask the family law section to conduct an investigation before the district court decides which of the parents is to have custody and where the children are to live.

## Looking after children and young people

Parents and other legal guardians are responsible for their children, but society also provides help to those who need



Photo: Johnér

it. All children and young people are entitled to preschool, school and health care in Sweden.

Most parents keep in close contact with maternity care centres (MVC) before their child is born and with child health care services (BVC) while their children are growing up. These centres employ trained midwives, nurses and doctors. Visits to MVC and BVC are free of charge.

### Maternity care centres

Maternity care centres (MVC) are where you go during your pregnancy to check the health and progress of your child and yourself. A midwife will examine you and talk to you about your pregnancy and coming delivery, and will answer any questions you may have as future parents.

You can also go to meetings where you can get information about pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding. It is common for the other parent of the child you are expecting to take part in these meetings to. In Sweden it is also common for the other parent to be present at the delivery.

### Child healthcare centres

Child health care centres (BVC) provide assistance to parents and examine your child's health to ensure that s/he is growing and developing normally. They can also give you advice and support on how best to look after your child. This includes advice about the child's development, breastfeeding, food and diseases. When you come home after the delivery, you are expected to contact the BVC yourself in order to make your first appointment. Sometimes this will take place in your home. The nurse will explain how



the BVC works and will check on your child's health. Your child will also be examined by a doctor. The first visit to the doctor at the BVC usually takes place when the child is six to eight weeks old. This is followed by further visits for health checkups until the child begins school.

Parents are offered vaccinations for their children at the BVC. Sweden has a vaccination programme against nine different diseases, including polio, whooping cough, diphtheria, tetanus, measles, mumps and rubella. The purpose of the vaccination programme is to provide children with protection against disease and ensure that they do not spread infections.

### **School health service**

When children begin school, they go to the school health service for preventative care.

All pupils in preschool class, compulsory school and upper-secondary school are entitled to school health services.

Pupils are offered health visits three times while at compulsory school and once while at upper-secondary school. The health visits encompass health discussion and checks of the child's length, weight, vision and back. Schools also have staff who work together to promote the pupils' health. This can include welfare officers, nurses, principals, special educators and teachers.

All girls in school year 5 or 6 are offered free vaccinations against infection by human papillomavirus (HPV). The vaccine helps prevent cervical cancer, condyloma and other cell changes on the cervix.

### **Being a parent in a new country**

Coming to a new country is a major change for both adults and children. Sometimes, children find it easier to integrate into the new community than adults. Sometimes this leads to adults becoming dependent on their children in contacts with the community. This in turn can lead to roles in the family changing, and too much responsibility being placed on the children. For instance, children should not be interpreting for their parents in their contacts with preschool, school, authorities or health care services.

It is important, therefore, that parents learn about the community the family has moved to and that they

understand that the child's new day-to-day life and living environment will also become a part of their identity. If they do, they will have a chance of becoming strong and unambiguous parents, thus creating a secure environment



Photo: Calle Bredberg, City of Gothenburg

for their children. If the whole family understands the new community's – and wider society's – norms and values, and can see similarities as well as differences with their own identity and culture, the children will have a good chance of a stable life. Many young people begin to liberate themselves from their parents during their teenage years. They want to start looking after themselves and prepare for adulthood. Parents are responsible for supporting their children on this journey into adulthood. It is important to find a balance, so that boundaries can be set for the child. At the same time, the child must be able to develop in the new country.

### Love and relationships

People's views on love and relationships vary between different cultures and societies. Of course, these things are also a matter of individual personalities. For many people in Sweden, it is natural to live together with the person you love without getting married or having children. There is also an understanding that it is part of developing during adolescence to explore love, relationships and one's own sexuality. Many young people have one or more love relationships while they are growing up.

### Forbidden to use violence against children

There is a section of Swedish law called the Children and



Parents Code. This stipulates that children have the right to health and social care, security and a good upbringing. One part of the Code is called the anti-corporal punishment law and has been in force in Sweden since 1979. Corporal punishment means using violence for the purposes of educating your children. The anti-corporal punishment law



Photo: Colourbox

says that it is forbidden to use physical or psychological violence against children. Physical violence includes all forms of violence against the body, which means that lighter slapping, hair-pulling and pinching are also considered physical violence.

However, you are of course allowed to pull a child away from something dangerous such as a hot cooker, and open window or something else that may harm the child.

Psychological violence can be to threaten, scare, ignore or lock up a child. Psychological violence can harm the child's self-esteem and development just as much as physical violence.

## Outlook on childrearing in Sweden

For the majority of parents in the world, love for their child is the most important thing. All children need parents and adults. Adults have to give them guidance, encouragement and love. Adults also have to set boundaries. How a child is brought up has a major impact on their self-confidence and self-esteem. Children who have a secure and loving upbringing also cope better at school and often feel better as adults.

In Sweden, how we raise children has changes much over the past one hundred years. At the beginning of the 20th century, many parents were very strict and it was important that children obeyed adults. Corporal punishment was seen by many to be a natural part of childrearing.



Photo: Colourbox

In the 1950s and 60s, the hard and determined forms of childrearing began to be questioned. Many began to change how they viewed childrearing. There was increasing talk about raising children with respect for them. However, it was still common to hit children in order to punish them.

The current, more democratic outlook on childrearing emerged in the 1970s. The goal is for children to learn to think for themselves, take responsibility themselves and become independent people with good self-confidence.

## Social services

The social services work in various ways to ensure that all children are well and can grow up in safe circumstances. Parents are responsible for giving their children the care

and safety they need. If necessary, the social services can support parents in their parenting. Seeking support in one's parenting is a way of assuming one's responsibilities as a parent. Parents who are given, and accept, help at an early stage can help avoid problems for their child later in life.

When children risk coming to harm, the social services cooperate with the family and other adults to ensure together that the child's situation improves. The social services are qualified to work on various types of problems in families. These include situations when there is a lot of fighting at home, when parents are worried about their health and how this affects their children, when children feel excluded, when children are subjected to violence, threats, harassment or abuse, when children commit crimes, abuse alcohol or drugs, and when children are living in families where abuse exists.

The social services can be informed that a child is in danger of coming to harm by someone making a notification about concern for a child. Such notifications may be made by e.g. a teacher, a head teacher, the police or health care workers. They have a professional obligation to notify the social services if they are concerned about a child's situation. Someone else who has come into contact with the family can also make this kind of notification if they are concerned for the child. When the social services receive a notification they have to determine whether the child needs immediate protection. They also have to determine whether they should begin an investigation into what support and help the child and the family need. Both parents and children must be made part of the investigation.

What usually happens is that the parents and the social services agree on what help the child and family need. Any help offered by the social services should first of all be given with the participation and approval of the parents.

If there is a considerable risk that the child's health or development will be harmed because of his/her situation at home or because of his/her own behaviour, the social services may need to give the child support against the will of his/her parents or legal guardians. This may mean that the child will spend a shorter or longer period living with another family (an emergency foster home or a foster home) or in a community home (HVB).

## Childcare

Childcare is a collective name for educational activities for younger children. Childcare encompasses such activities as preschools, family day nurseries and after-school recreation centres. Children can be there while their parents are working or studying.

Municipal childcare is offered in all municipalities. There are also independent and private childcare facilities run by companies or organisations. Children aged between one and five are entitled to attend preschool or a family day nursery. If you are a jobseeker or taking parental leave for the child's younger siblings, the older child has a right to about three hours of childcare per day, or 15 hours per week.



Photo: Johnér

## Preschool

For children who do not attend compulsory school for various reasons, there are special schools and compulsory schools for pupils with learning disabilities. Special schools are for children who have a hearing impairment, for example. Compulsory schools for pupils with learning disabilities are for children who have a learning disability. Pupils in these schools receive extra teacher support.

## Open preschool

An open preschool is a meeting place for parents who are taking parental leave and their children. At open preschools there are trained staff and it is a good place to get to know other parents and children. Open preschools can be found in many municipalities in Sweden.

## Preschool class

All children are given a place in a preschool class the year they turn six. It is also sometimes called the school introduction programme for six-year olds. In the preschool class, the children prepare for compulsory school before starting year one.

## After-school recreation centre

Children aged six to twelve have the right to go to an after-school recreation centre before and after school. Their parents must work or study in order for the children to be allowed to go to the after-school recreation centre. The after-school recreation centre is often in the same building as the school. Children aged ten to twelve can go to an open recreation facility which is usually close to the school.

## Family day nursery/educational care

Some childcare is called educational care or family day nursery. A person with educational training accepts children into their home, provides care and has preschool facilities, including educational activities. Children who go to school can go to a family day nursery after school. This then functions as an after-school recreation centre.

## Cooperation with parents

Parents are important to childcare. They know their children best. A parent comes with the child when they start going to preschool or family day nursery and stays until the child feels secure. This is called acclimatisation and usually lasts for about two weeks. Staff at preschools and after-school recreation centres usually invite parents in to discuss progress. The staff then describe how the child is doing at the preschool and how they are developing. Parents also have the opportunity to say how you think things are working out at the preschool.



## Apply for a childcare place

To get a place at preschool or after-school recreation centre, you must apply. You apply to the municipality. There are different rules in different municipalities, but you usually have to apply for a place several months in advance. Your child must be at least one year old to begin preschool.

## Compulsory school

All children in Sweden must go to compulsory school for nine years. This is stipulated in the Swedish Education Act and is called compulsory school attendance. Every school year has an autumn semester and a spring semester. Children are subject to compulsory school attendance beginning in the autumn semester of the year they become seven years old or when they begin year 1 until the end of the spring semester of year 9. There are plans for school

All children go to compulsory school for 9 years.



Photo: Colourbox

work called syllabuses and curricula. These state what children are to learn in school and how the teaching is to happen. The teaching and books are free for all children in compulsory school. They also get free lunch.

Parents have the right to choose which school their children



attend. The child always has a right to a place in school in the area in which they live. If you choose another school, you apply for a place by contacting the principal of the school you are interested in. The child can start at that school if there is a place available.

For children who do not attend compulsory school for various reasons, there are special schools and compulsory schools for pupils with learning disabilities. Special schools are for children who have a hearing impairment, for example. Compulsory schools for pupils with learning disabilities are for children who have a learning disability. Pupils in these schools receive extra teacher support.

## Subjects in compulsory school

A subject is something you are taught, for example maths or Swedish. Each subject has a syllabus which states what the pupils are to know when they complete compulsory school.

## Sexuality and relationship education

Teaching about sexuality and relationships is part of the Swedish curriculum. It deals with love and how to live in a respectful, equal and loving relationship with another person. Sex education has been provided in Swedish schools for more than 50 years.

## Grades

Pupils receive grades beginning in year 6. Children receive grades each semester. They are given their final grade at the end of year 9.

The grades are set on a scale A, B, C, D, E and F. The grade F means the pupil has not passed the subject. The highest grade is A.

The National Agency for Education has determined the rules for setting grades. The National Agency for Education is a public authority that has to ensure all children and pupils in Swedish schools receive a high-quality education in a safe environment.

## Language teaching

Children are entitled to mother tongue teaching if one or both parents have a mother tongue other than Swedish. In order

to be entitled to participate, the child also have to have basic knowledge of the language and use it at home every day.

Pupils who have another mother tongue are also entitled to teaching in Swedish as a second language. Swedish as a second language is for both beginners and pupils who already know Swedish. The Subject Swedish as a second language has the same level as the subject Swedish, but the teaching is adapted to pupils with a mother tongue other than Swedish.

### Preparatory class

There is something called preparatory class for children who have recently arrived in Sweden. In a preparatory class, the pupils receive training in Swedish and teaching in various subjects. The pupils are taught in a way that makes it possible for them to go on to a class in normal compulsory school as quickly as possible. The teaching can vary depending on the age, mother tongue and previous knowledge of the individual pupil. There are preparatory classes in many municipalities in Sweden.

## Upper-secondary school

When pupils are in the final year of compulsory school, they can apply for upper-secondary school. Studying at upper-secondary school in Sweden is voluntary. It is also free. Young people aged 16 to 20 can study at upper-secondary school if they have completed compulsory school. Almost all young people choose to continue studying at upper-secondary school.



Photo: Johnér

Upper-secondary school also has curricula and syllabuses that have been produced by the National Agency for Education. A syllabus states what the pupils are to know when they finish. The grading system in upper-secondary school is the same as in compulsory school.

Pupils choose which upper secondary school they want to attend and which programme they want to study. The pupil has to include several different choices of school or programme in his/her application. There is no guarantee that there will be places available in his/her first choice.

There are many different programmes to apply for. There is usually a study guidance counsellor in compulsory schools who can provide help and advice.

In upper secondary school, pupils specialise further and prepare for continued studies, e.g. at university or in higher vocational education.

In order to study a national programme at upper-secondary school, the pupil must have passing grades from compulsory school in Swedish or Swedish as a second language and in maths and English.

- In order to be admitted to a vocational programme, the pupil must also have passed at least five other subjects.
- In order to be admitted to a programme that prepares them for higher education, the pupil must also have passed at least nine other subjects.

Pupils that have not passed these subjects can study an introductory programme. The introductory programmes are to help them progress to other studies. There are five introductory programmes. One of these programmes is language introduction, which is specifically intended for young people who have recently arrived in the country. In this programme, young people learn Swedish at the same time as they are able to study other subjects. Contact your municipality to see what opportunities are available where you live.

Read more about upper-secondary school programmes and admissions on the website **[www.utbildningsinfo.se](http://www.utbildningsinfo.se)**

# Schools and democracy

There is much discussion of democracy in the Swedish school system. One of the goals of school is for pupils to grow into adults who participate in and take responsibility for the collective society.

Pupils must learn how to live in a democracy and what their rights and obligations are. For this reason, classes often include assignments in which pupils have to apply the practical workings of democracy.

## School in the past

The Swedish school system has changed a lot since the middle of the 20th century. In the past, there were strict rules in school. Teachers were allowed to hit their pupils. This has been banned since 1958.

Pupils did not address their teacher as "you" or use their first name. Instead they said "miss" or "sir". Pupils were given grades from their first year of school. A pupil who did not pass two or three subjects was forced to repeat the same school year.

## School today

Today we have a school system in which pupils have to learn to think independently and they have the opportunity to influence their own education. The teacher is the leader of the group, but there is a more equality to the contact between teacher and pupil.

Swedish schools have fundamental values that are based on the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Fundamental values are how we treat one another as children, young people and adults. This means that no one may treat anyone else badly in Swedish schools. Girls and boys have to have the same opportunities in school. Pupils can influence their education by attending class meetings and class council meetings.

## Schools and the family

In Sweden, there is an expectation that the parents will be involved in their children's school work. Parents, teachers and pupils work together so that children will have the best

possible time in school. School staff want parents to play an active part in their children's lives and for the parents to know and understand what their children are doing in school.



Photo: Mikael Jönsson

Each semester, parents come to the school to discuss their child's progress. During this discussion, the parents can meet the teacher in peace and quiet. They have the chance to talk about how the child is developing in school and any help the child may need. The teacher writes an individual development plan at this time. If you have a mother tongue other than Swedish, you are entitled to an interpreter at this meeting.

Schools also hold parents' meetings at which parents can obtain information about and influence what happens in the school.

As parents, you are also welcome to join your child at school to see how it works and how things are going for your child. You can also call your teacher or the principal in order to ask questions or talk about your child.

## Financial support for families

Families with children can apply for housing allowance, parental benefits, maintenance support and childcare allowance from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. All families with children in Sweden receive child allowance. Housing allowance is provided to those who have a low income and a high rent. Childcare allowance is paid to those



who have children with disabilities. If you are divorced and the children live with you, the other parent has to pay you child support. This is money that is to cover some of the costs of the child's upkeep. If the other parent does not pay or has a very low income, you can instead apply for money from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. This is called maintenance support. You can find more information on the Swedish Social Insurance Agency's website: [www.forsakringskassan.se](http://www.forsakringskassan.se)

## Parental insurance

Parental insurance allows parents who have a job to take time off work to look after their child. Parental allowance is the financial aid that one parent receives from Försäkringskassan to allow him/her to be at home with his/her child during the initial period.

It is common for both women and men to take time off work or studies in order to be at home with their children, but there

A father picks up his child from preschool.



Photo: Colourbox



are still more women than men who do. To encourage a more even distribution of parental insurance, there are reserved days that cannot be transferred to the other guardian.

You can receive parental benefits for up to 480 days. You receive about 80 per cent of your wage for the first 390 days. For the 90 remaining days, you receive SEK 180 per day.

Parents who are out of work or on a low wage are entitled to SEK 250 per day for 480 days. The father or the second parent of a newborn baby is entitled to be off work and receive money from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency for ten days in conjunction with the child's birth.

Recently arrived parents with children can apply for parental allowance if they have settled in Sweden. They will be eligible for compensation for varying numbers of days depending on how old the child is.

If you work, you can also obtain parental benefits when your child is ill and has to be at home from preschool or school. This is called temporary parental benefits or care of a child (VAB). You receive 80 per cent of your wage. You can take up to 120 days off work per year per child.

### **Shorter working hours**

If you have children under the age of eight who have not finished their first year of school, you are entitled to shorter working hours. For example, this means that you can work six hours per day instead of eight.

### **Employment protection**

The law prohibits employers from discriminating against job applicants who are pregnant. It is also forbidden to fire someone because they are pregnant.

### **Child allowance and student grants**

Försäkringskassan pays out child benefits for all children. The first child benefit payment is made one month after the child's birth or one month after the child has moved to Sweden. Child benefit is paid until the child turns 16. A child benefit supplement for is paid to those to parents with two or more children. The amount depends on how many children you have. Child benefit payments are made on around the 20th of each month. If you and the other parent have joint custody, you share the child benefit between you,

each receiving SEK 625 per month. This applies if your child was born on or after 1 March 2014. If your child was born before 1 March 2014, the child benefit is paid out to the parent who gave birth to the child. If you have sole custody of your child, you receive the whole benefit, i.e. SEK 1 250 per month. You pay no tax on the child benefit or child benefit supplement.

You receive a child benefit for your child until the quarter in which s/he turns 16. Young people between the ages of 16 and 20 who are studying at upper secondary school receive student grants. The student grant is SEK 1 250 per month and is paid over ten months, from September to June. A pupil can receive a student grant until the spring term in which s/he turns 20. If a pupil has a high level of invalid absenteeism, this can limit his/her right to a study grant. For pupils aged 16–18, student grants are paid to the parents. When the pupil turns 18, s/he becomes emancipated and can receive the grant him/herself. If the family has a low income, the pupil may also be entitled to a grant supplement.

The Swedish Board for Study Support (CSN) looks after student grants.

Those who are foreign citizens and are going to study at upper-secondary school must apply for the basic right to student finance. You can find more information on the website [www.csn.se](http://www.csn.se)

## **Housing allowance for families with children**

You can apply for housing allowance if you have children. You must live in and be registered on the population register in Sweden in order to obtain housing allowance.

The number of people in your family determines whether you are entitled to housing allowance and, if so, how much. This also depends on how high your rent is and how much you earn.

It is important that you inform the Social Insurance Agency if your income changes. Otherwise you may become liable to pay money back.

# Discussion questions for Chapter 5

What is your attitude towards cohabiting – living together without being married?

Are there similarities and differences in the outlook on childrearing between Sweden and your own upbringing?

When can you turn to social services for advice and support?

Under what circumstances can it be a good idea for social services to take children into care?

What do you think about the fact that the majority of children in Sweden go to preschool before they start compulsory school?

What do you think about the fundamental values of the Swedish school system?

As a parent, how can you support your child's learning?