How to work with schools in Sweden

Where and when

Sunday, 24 November 2025 – 11am to 1pm, online meeting (GoogleMeet)

Attendees

- Nina Shah: group facilitator
- Amy Boswood: provided knowledge, information, processes and Swedish language terminology around children's rights in the education system, and school legal duties
- Four members of the Facebook group: *English speaking neurodivergent families in Sweden* – including Leah Irby who is happy to be contacted to support others

Main topics discussed

Key issues raised in the introductions

1) While there are many teachers who are amazing at supporting neurodivergent (ND) kids, many are failing to fulfil the duties required of them – this can be due to a lack of knowledge around rights on the behalf of parents, ignorance among teachers around neurodivergence, unwillingness on the behalf of senior staff in schools to support appropriately.
2) Reports of schools refusing to allow children to attend full time, to attend fritids, or to attend daytrips run by the school.
3) Mixed bag reported in terms of support – some schools refused one-to-one aides or language support, other schools provided these things; some schools offer no quiet time, others insist on exclusion from the classroom – sometimes adaptations feel like a checklist, rather than being adapted to suit a particular child.
4) There are variations around the country in terms of support from BUP, Habilitering, doctors, psychologists, social services, and schools.
5) Variations in access of other support such as omvårdningsbidrag (financial benefits from Forsäkringskassan), LSS family support from the local kommun, access to resursskola or similar.

Amy outlined some of the legal processes to support children at school. She highlighted that in Sweden there is a legal obligation for children to attend school full time, and for schools to ensure that this is possible for all children – that they are legally obliged to make adaptations required to support this. There is no possibility of homeschooling or online learning. (NOTE: there was an article last year about one school trialling online learning for children struggling to access school in Sweden. There are no plans as yet to roll this out. NS)

Different levels of school support

(1) Anpassningar (adaptations) – first level of support

Adjustments made at class level, aimed to support children with extra needs, but that also support the whole class – no extra funding needed for this, and possible in a teacher's usual working day. These might include:

- The day routine on the board with timings

- A digital clock as well as an analogue clock
- Making rooms more neutral so they are less stimulating
- Providing a box of ear defenders for all children to use
- **Onskar mat** – 'wish food' – schools are legally obliged to provide food that all children will eat – so it is very common to offer children with restricted diets their 'safe foods' every day e.g. plain pasta, chicken nuggets and chips

(2) Individuella anpassningar (individual adaptations) – second level of support

These are individual adjustments – again these are changes the teacher can offer during their regular working day, with no extra need for funding. These might include:

- A written checklist of work for a child to go through
- Visual reminders of the daily routine
- Ear defenders on their desk
- Sitting a child in a particular position in the classroom to aid concentration
- Allowing them breaks or to leave the classroom from time to time
- Harder work in certain subjects
- Allowing a child to fidget with things at their desk
- Allowing a child to listen to music while working or translate work using an iPad
- Extra time to take exams or tests
- Allowing a child with eating restrictions (and ARFID) to eat in a separate room than the main hall
- Allowing a child with signification eating restrictions to bring their own food in:
    - this will usually require a letter from the vårdcentral plus supporting letters from a dietitian or psychologist (or both) stating that the child needs their own food
    - the doctor at the vårdcentral will usually require a letter from a dietitian or psychologist (or both) stating the need of the child to have their own food – before they provide you with a letter
    - clearly the foods cannot contain allergens such as nuts, but there may be additional allergens to avoid depending on other children's needs in the school

These might also include adaptations that cost a little, but not a lot, such as: desk screens, wobble cushions.

Children who don't speak Swedish are entitled to **studiehandling**, extra support with language for one hour a week, for one year (usually). The quality of this varies.

(3) Särskilt stöd (special support) – third level of support

These are additional adaptations that the teacher can't usually offer as part of their regular working day. They may require funding or additional staff support. These might include:

- Work in small groups to help concentration or learning
- Extra language support

(4) Åtgärdsplan (action plan) – fourth level of support – a legal document

This will have overlap with the särskilt stöd documentation, and lists out large adjustments made for a specific child, what the child struggles with, what their strengths are. Parents have the right to see this, suggest changes or amendments, but the school isn't required to take the amendments on board. It **must** be updated regularly and modified if the adaptations are not working. Schools are not legally obliged to tell parents they have put their plan in place, but you can request – for example, at six-monthly intervals – to see all documentation held by the school that contains your child's name.

It is a legal document, and once in place, the school **must** abide by it. They will use this as the basis to apply for funding (**tilläggsbelopp**) if needed, but even if they don't receive funding, they must carry out what they have recommended.

It is also an essential document to have if you want to apply for any specialist schools (resursskola) – these exist for children with a diagnosis of autism and (1) average or above average intelligence, or (2) for children with additional learning difficulties. There are a handful that cater to children with 'just' ADHD, but these are very rare.

This document should be put in place, for example:

- If a child is at risk of failing subjects or has already failed
- Their previous support plans are not working
- If a child is a danger to others or themselves e.g. they run away from school, they are aggressive to other children or staff – all dangerous incidents should be documented in a report
- In a preschool it might be if a child is non-verbal, needs help using the toilet, or cannot eat alone

(5) Shorter days/reduced hours

Due to the legal requirement for children to attend full time schooling, and for schools to support parents by caring for children throughout the parental working days, shorter days should be a **last** resort, and should be suggested only:

- If BUP or a doctor has recommended shorter days e.g. due to burnout
- If **all** the previous steps have been taken, and the child is still struggling

Otherwise, the school is legally obliged to offer full time schooling, **plus** fritids, if the parents need the additional hours to enable them to work.

SCHOOL TRIPS: it should be noted that **all** these adaptations should be implemented or special ones created for anything that deviates from the routine of the usual school day. As school trips should be around curriculum topics, they need to make this possible for all children. If they absolutely cannot support a child on this trip, you can offer to go with your child (or they may ask you), or they have to offer an alternative day back at the school for your child. They **must not** suggest the child simply stays home that day!

Children's Rights

In Sweden, *children's rights* are referred to as **Barnets rättigheter** or, more formally, **Barnkonventionen** (the Swedish name for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). An overview is provided in Annex 1.

Extra help

➔ **Omvårdningsbidrag**

This is a benefit provided by Försäkringskassan for parents of children with additional needs. There is a simple application on their website under children with special needs, and they will then call you for a lengthy phone call (with translator if necessary) to ask about the details of your daily life.

It is aimed to support parents:

- Whose children require significantly more care and energy than other children of the same age
- Whose children cannot be in school, so parents cannot work full-time

➔ **LSS family support**

This is a department within each kommun, and again a simple contact form, followed by a lengthy in-person visit, where they will usually briefly want to meet the children, then have a long discussion around needs and daily life.

They can offer monthly free childcare support so parents can spend time alone together or get tasks done that are otherwise impossible. It will usually only be awarded if the parents have no nearby family to help.

➔ **Specialist schools**

ADHD-only schools are rare – most are available only to children with a diagnosis of autism:

- **Resursskola** – for children with high IQ – follows the regular curriculum of mainstream schools
- **Anpassadskola (previously särskola)** – for children with lower IQ – follows a reduced curriculum
- **Behandlingsskola** – for children and families with a high need for therapy as part of the school curriculum – this placement can only be made after consultation with social services

A little note on **modersmål** or **hemspråk** classes (classes in the language you mostly speak at home) – these are advisable a little later in schooling life, as there is a limit to the number of years you can receive this (seven years). If taken later on, the subject can be switched out for a failing subject or lower graded subject, to boost a child's results in year 9. In mainstream schools these classes will often be provided after school, so if your child cannot attend a longer day, they will miss out. In specialist schools, they will always offer an adaptation to provide classes during school hours.

➔ **Social services**

Schools will often call out social services to investigate families where a child is struggling. They will check how home-life is and offer appropriate support. This might include family therapy or referrals to LSS, it might also include parenting support.

NOTE – while this can be very frightening for immigrants who have a different culture back home around social services, this is a supportive offer, not a threat to take children away.

More often than not, the social services will refer the issues back to the school, seeing that parents commonly have much support and knowledge in place at home already, and say that the school environment is the one that needs adaptations. If the family does need support, this will be offered.

You can also contact social services proactively to state that your child is struggling with reactions to school, and it is coming out at home – they will speak to you, offer any help, and can then support you in asking the school to make additional adaptations. It will also prevent the school needing to make a report, or triggering the visit from their side.

From a school perspective

Educators are legally obliged to make reports of concern to social services if they are concerned about a child.

- Usually if the concern is around physical discipline – which is illegal in Sweden – they cannot speak with the parents first, which many educators find incredibly hard, as they often have positive relationships with parents.
- If the concern is something lesser – for example a child comes into school in pyjamas three days in a row, or a child is regularly hungry, or a child has no outdoor clothes – they will usually:
    - Speak with the parent first and find out the reason:
        - It may be sensory issues and the child will change only at weekends
        - The child may refuse to eat in the mornings
        - The family cannot afford winter clothes
    - Suggest support options:
        - As long as the child is happy and warm enough pyjamas are fine
        - They can bring an extra snack into school
        - The school may have spare clothing they can give the family, or suggest second hand options on local FB pages or in charity stores
    - How the parents react to the suggestions will indicate the next steps:
        - If the school decides there are no concerns (e.g. sensory issues around clothing), or the parents take on board the suggestions and the issues are 'fixed', the matter ends there
        - If the concern continues, the school will be obliged to report to social services, but will tell the parents first, and the aim will be for social services to put in place extra support for the family

➔ **BUP (child and adolescent psychiatric department)**

Will provide neurodivergent (npf) assessments, will also provide follow up medication and regular medical checks for children that take medication prescribed by them e.g. ADHD meds, melatonin etc. Will sometimes offer to liaise with school or recommend things such as temporary reduced hours for children in significant distress.

If school support isn't working well, you can also request a reassessment from BUP e.g. if they have an autism diagnosis, but you suspect they also have ADHD.

➔ **Habilitering**

An organisation with regional offices, that supports children with autism. Will offer support and courses for parents around every day life challenges, as well as extra support and referrals for children and young people e.g. occupational therapy assessment (can provide free items such as whiteboards and timers for children), referrals for ARFID.

They can also provide guidance and courses for school staff, and have open-house days to visit a mock up of a home or classroom, to show typical helpful adaptations.

Extra info: https://www.habilitering.se/om-oss/vara-mottagningar/habiliteringens-anhorigcenter/ – this is the centre that offers help to someone who is a relative of an autistic person.

ANNEX 1: Children's Rights

An overview of **Barnets rättigheter** or **Barnkonventionen –** (the Swedish name for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child): Sweden incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law on **1 January 2020**, which means its principles must be followed by all authorities and institutions (schools, healthcare, social services, courts, etc.). Below is a summary of the core areas of children's rights as understood and applied in Sweden.

1. Non-discrimination (Icke-diskriminering)

Every child has the right to equal treatment regardless of:

- gender
- background
- disability
- language
- religion
- sexual orientation (their own or their parents')
- other status

2. The best interests of the child (Barnets bästa)

In *all* decisions involving children – legal, educational, social services, migration, healthcare – the child's best interests must be the primary consideration.

3. The right to life, survival, and development (Rätt till liv och utveckling)

Children have the right to:

- physical and mental health care
- education
- protection from harm
- opportunities for personal, social, and cultural development

4. The right to be heard and to participate (Rätt att komma till tals)

Children have the right to express their views on matters affecting them. Authorities must:

- listen to them, and take their views into account according to their age and maturity

Additional rights emphasised in Sweden:

- **Protection from violence and abuse (Skydd mot våld och övergrepp)** – including corporal punishment, which is illegal
- **Right to education (Rätt till utbildning)** – free and compulsory schooling
- **Right to health care (Rätt till hälsa och sjukvård)** – access to medical, dental, mental health services
- **Right to privacy (Rätt till privatliv)** – protection of personal data and confidentiality
- **Right to family life (Rätt till familjeliv)** – including protection in custody cases and foster care
- **Protection for children in migration (Skydd för barn på flykt)** – including asylum-seeking and undocumented children

ANNEX 2: Additional information sent by participants.

1. Basic rights in Swedish school

In Sweden, all pupils have a right to guidance, stimulation and support to reach as far as possible in their learning. A formal diagnosis is not required for a student to receive support.

2. First steps when you see a student is struggling

1. Talk to the mentor/class teacher
2. Ask for the case to be brought to the "elevhälsa" (student health team)
3. Ask for written documentation
    - Extra adjustments should be visible in documentation
    - Special support must be written in an åtgärdsprogram, which you have the right to read and, if needed, appeal.

3. Typical support for students with autism

What is relevant depends on the individual student, but common measures are:

- Clear structure
    - Visual and/or written schedules
    - Predictable routines, clear starts and endings of lessons
- Adapted learning environment
    - A calm place in the classroom, or a quieter separate room when needed
    - Headphones/ear defenders
    - Reduced sensory overload (light, noise, movement)
- Clear instructions
    - Tasks broken down into small steps
    - Written support and visual examples
    - Checking that the student has understood, not just "Do you understand?"
- Support in teaching
    - Extra explanations from a special educator
    - Access to a support person/resource in the classroom
    - Small-group teaching for certain subjects
- Time and breaks
    - Extended time for tests and written assignments
    - Planned breaks to prevent overload
- Tools and learning materials
    - Digital tools for reading/writing, timers, structured planners
    - Adapted learning materials, often via SPSM (Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten – the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools)

4. SPSM – Specialpedagogiska skolmyndigheten

SPSM mainly supports schools and school owners, not individual parents directly – but you can:

- Encourage the school to contact SPSM for special educational counselling.
- Point them to SPSM's materials on autism and teaching, NPF (neuropsychiatric) study packages and accessible teaching materials.

5. Parent/support organisations

Two important national organisations:

- Autism Sverige (Autism Sweden, formerly Autism- och Aspergerförbundet)
  - Information about rights in school
  - Local associations, support lines, courses and written guides
- Riksförbundet Attention
  - Focus on ADHD/ADD, autism and other NPF
  - Produces guides about school rights and how to argue for your child's needs, including sample letters and checklists

These organisations are very helpful when you need to:

- Prepare for meetings with school
- Formulate formal requests or complaints
- Meet other parents in similar situations

6. If the support is still not enough – escalation path

If you feel the school's efforts are not sufficient:

1. Start with dialogue with mentor and principal (rektor)
   - Ask for a review of the support plan/åtgärdsprogram.
2. Request a new pedagogical assessment
   - If the school claims they can't do more, ask for an updated investigation of the student's needs.
3. Contact the school owner (huvudman)
   - For a municipal school: the municipality.
   - For an independent school: the governing body/board.
4. Use the formal complaints route
   - First to the Rektor of the school or school's own complaints procedure.
   - Next to the municipality/kommun.
   - If the school still does not fulfil its obligations according to the Education Act, you can turn to Skolinspektionen (the Swedish Schools Inspectorate).