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This is the published version of a paper published in *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Arnell, L., Thunberg, S. (2023)

Young Children's Lives at Domestic Violence Shelters: Mothers' Perspectives on Their Children's Experiences

*Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-023-00948-7>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

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# Young Children's Lives at Domestic Violence Shelters: Mothers' Perspectives on Their Children's Experiences

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Accepted: 13 September 2023  
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## Abstract

**Purpose** The aim of this study is to analyze mothers' narratives about their children's life situation while living at domestic violence shelters in Sweden. More precisely, the analysis focuses on determining what aspects are highlighted as being most important for the children's living situation during their stay.

**Method** This study is based on interviews with mothers who have experience of living at a domestic violence shelter together with their young child/ren. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the narratives.

**Results** The analysis resulted in seven themes important for the children's lives during their shelter stay. These are: *safety, isolation, a child-friendly environment, shared living space, social relations at the shelter, children's health during their stay, and support at the shelter.*

**Conclusion** In the narratives, safety was highlighted as the most important issue, and as something that also affects other aspects of the children's lives during their time at the shelter. A child-friendly environment, access to activities and support, and positive social relations at the shelter are also important. In addition, positive experiences regarding these aspects can be understood to counteract the feeling of isolation and improve children's ability to process their experiences.

**Keywords** Children · Domestic violence shelter · Intimate partner violence · Living environment

## Introduction

Domestic violence shelters give mothers experiencing abuse an opportunity to protect their children by leaving a violent partner, who is often also the children's father, and taking them to a safe place free from violence. Accordingly, the common purpose of domestic violence shelters is to offer protection and a place that is free from violence. Several emergency services also offer support and assistance with legal matters. Most domestic violence shelters also offer some form of childcare and treatment for children regarding issues such as anxiety, trauma, and depression, as well as

support in the relationship between child and mother (Bowler et al., 2015; Poole et al., 2008). Research also shows that safety and support for their children is one of the most important factors in women's decision to ask for help from a domestic violence shelter (Jonker et al., 2014). Research regarding the children's lives while at a domestic violence shelter is, however, limited (Fernández-González et al., 2018; Theobald et al., 2021; Thunberg et al., 2022).

The research that does exist on children's experiences of violence and domestic violence shelters shows that, among children living in shelters, 80–90% have witnessed violence and about 50% have themselves been directly exposed to violence at home (Fernández-González et al., 2018). In Sweden, where this study is based, 40% of all children in Sweden has experienced some form of abuse from an adult, including 10% who have experienced violence against one of their parents (Jernbro et al., 2023). In addition, among children who have experienced violence against their mother, 95% have been at home on at least one occasion when their mother was abused, 77% of the children were in the same room on at least one occasion when the mother was being abused, and for 8 out of 10 children the violence

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had lasted throughout the child's entire life (Almqvist & Broberg, 2004).

Living with violence affects children's health (Annerbäck et al., 2012; Holt et al., 2008; Jernbro et al., 2023), their social relations (Hyden, 2021; Selvik & Øverlien, 2015; Øverlien & Hydén, 2009), and their preschool and school attendance (Selvik & Øverlien, 2015). For example, in relation to children at domestic violence shelters, research shows that those who have been exposed to or witnessed more severe forms of violence more often show symptoms of post-traumatic stress, while behavioral problems are more likely to be related to the mother's anxiety and anger (Jarvis et al., 2005). Research also shows that children's behavioral problems sometimes become worse during the initial period at a shelter, which Fredland et al. (2014) argue might be related to the safe shelter environment where the children feel able to express their emotions and traumas.

In addition, factors such as children's exposure, and vulnerability, not only to violence, but also to their mother's health, such as her worry, anxiety, or anger, and siblings' worry and fear also affect their health (Vass & Haj-Yahia, 2020). The ways in which a child reacts to being exposed to violence, and how strongly, do vary (Howell et al., 2010; Levendosky et al., 2002), but to enable them to manage and live with them, it is crucial that they receive safe accommodation and the support they need (Hauge & Kiamanesh, 2020; Theobald et al., 2021). Due to their varying experiences and responses to those experiences, children may need different forms of support (Broberg et al., 2011) and to be able to influence the design of that support (Cater, 2014). In addition, children themselves emphasize that it is important to be listened to and that their wishes and needs are respected (Bris, 2020; Källström & Thunberg, 2019; Norcross, 2010).

Research on children's own experiences of living in shelters shows that they often have positive experiences during their stay (e.g., Jarvis et al., 2005; Øverlien et al., 2009). Children themselves highlight, for example, that it is fun to be at the shelter, that the staff are kind, and that they appreciate the playground, outdoor space, and structured activities with the shelter staff (Chanmugam, 2011; Øverlien, 2011). Children also describe feeling safe at the shelter and state that they are happy to be away from the abuser and to get a break from the violence (Jarvis et al., 2005; Øverlien, 2011; Selvik, 2020; Vass & Haj-Yahia, 2020). Nevertheless, research is scarce and most of what has been done focuses on factors relating to children's lives and relationships outside the shelters.

Against this background, *the aim of this study is to analyze mothers' narratives about their children's life situation while living in domestic violence shelters in Sweden*. More precisely, the analysis focuses on determining what aspects

are highlighted as being most important for the children's living situation during their stay.

## Domestic Violence Shelters in a Swedish Context

In Sweden, there are approximately 280 domestic violence shelters (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020). This number has increased in recent years. According to the National Board of Health and Welfare (2013), the corresponding figure was just over 200 in 2012. There is no exact figure on how many children are living in domestic violence shelters each year. However, according to the National Board of Health and Welfare (2020), there were approximately 6,500 adults and 6,200 children in 2020. This is an increase of 38% since their last survey in 2012. It is important to notice that the children are seen as accompanying their mothers and thus are not understood as legal subjects. However, this is something that is beginning to change and in June 2023 the government presented a proposition of a new law, expected to be enacted in April 2024, that will strengthen children's rights in relation to domestic violence shelter placements.

The existing shelters are run by non-profit organizations (54%), as private companies (37%), or by the various municipalities (9%) (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020). This means that their living conditions and how they operate vary. The type of accommodation also varies and includes, for example, apartments or shared accommodation. In the latter, families generally have their own bedroom but share a kitchen and living room. In addition, the average stay at domestic violence shelters in Sweden is about 60 nights; that is, the mothers and their children live there for about two months.

## Children's Rights Perspective

A children's rights perspective includes viewing children as bearers of their own rights, which should not be ignored or trespassed upon by adults. Children are not just at a stage of *becoming* adults, they are also in a state of *being* children. Childhood is something different from adulthood because children are dependent upon adults for, among other things, protection and provisioning, but at the same time children are also developing their independence through participation and being respected. All of this is illustrated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). The fundamental principles state that all children have the same rights and equal value, that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration, and that all children have a right to life and development. According to the four main principles, children also have a right to express their views and have them respected.

In addition, and of great relevance to this project, is Article 19 of the UNCRC, which states that nations should take all appropriate measures to protect children from different forms of violence or maltreatment. This includes protection from domestic violence.

## Method

This article is based on interviews with 13 mothers who have experience of living at a domestic violence shelter together with their child/ren (aged 0–6 years) after leaving a partner who has been violent and who in most cases was the father of the child/ren. The data is part of a larger project—*name omitted for blind review*—with a focus on children's life situation in relation to the experience of living in, or being denied a place at, a domestic violence shelter. The project encompasses the process of leaving a violent home through to the time after leaving the shelter. As part of this project, children aged 7–17 and mothers of children aged 0–6 were interviewed. In total, 27 interviews with mothers and children are included in the larger project.

To clarify, the focus of this article is on the life situation of children aged 0–6 years while living in a domestic violence shelter; hence, interviews conducted with these children's mothers have been analyzed. Although the focus of these interviews was on the experiences of children aged 0–6 years old, four of the mothers also had older children living with them at the shelter. Altogether, the mothers had 21 children living with them at the shelter, with a mean age of 4.7 years. Sixteen of the 21 children were aged 0–6 years old. Hence, the mothers sometimes talked about the older children's experiences as part of their narratives, and so, from an ethical standpoint, their whole narratives have been included, but with a focus on the younger children's experiences as described in the interviews.

The interviews with the mothers were conducted by the two authors between February 2021 and November 2022. They were semi-structured and focused on different phases—from the process of leaving a violent home to the move away from the shelter (Rösare, 2015). This article focuses on the time at the shelter; specifically, open-ended questions regarding the day-to-day life, health, and social relations of children living in a domestic violence shelter. During the interviews, the mothers were invited to talk about the different phases and how their children had been affected. Exactly how the follow-up questions were formulated depended on how each interview developed and what the mother talked about and highlighted in her narrative. This has meant that the interviews and the narratives that the mothers provided differ in length and to some extent also in focus. For example, some focus more on their child/ren's

health and the support they received while at the shelter, and others on the shelter environment.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 min and were conducted at the shelters, in the mothers' homes, or via digital media, by mobile phone or Zoom, depending on the mother's choice of interview location. The women were recruited with the help of staff from six domestic violence shelters in Sweden, shelters run by non-profit organizations, as private companies, or by municipalities. The shelter staff were asked to pass on information about the project to women with children currently at the shelter or with experience of living there within the previous three years. The mothers were then invited to participate if they had at least one child aged 0–6 years at the time of their stay at the shelter. Five of the 13 mothers who participated were still living at the shelter with their children.

The data collection ended when theoretical saturation was reached in the material, meaning that the mothers were describing similar experiences with no additional information being added to the material as a whole. Theoretical saturation is often reached at around 10–25 interviews, depending on the subject being studied (Guest et al., 2006; Kvale, 2012).

## Ethics

**Ethical Approval** was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2020:04561). Still, several important ethical issues arose during the study. First and foremost was the importance of information and informed consent, but the sensitivity of the research subject has also influenced everything from planning the project to writing up the results. The women who showed interest in participating in the study were provided with written information by the shelter staff, whereafter an appointment for an interview was made. The information was then repeated verbally before the interview and the women were also given the opportunity to ask the interviewer questions about the study to clarify any uncertainties they might have. Thereafter, the women were asked to give their informed consent, and told that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To protect the identities of the women and their children, all the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

For the well-being of the mothers and their child/ren, the interviewers have tried to minimize any risks regarding safety, as well as the risk of stirring up negative emotions or trauma related to their experiences of violence. Hence, the interviewers have tried to pay attention to the situation and the mothers' well-being during the interviews, and the women were also given information about where to seek help if the interview triggered any difficult feelings. Moreover, the contacts with the shelters, in addition to being a

support during the recruitment process, have also assisted in meeting the women's and children's need for support, safety, and well-being.

### Analytical Procedure

Thematic analysis has been used to analyze the mothers' narratives. This can be undertaken in different ways. In this study, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six analytical steps have been used as a guide. These steps are: (1) familiarizing yourself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. In the analysis of this work, the authors started the process of familiarizing themselves with the interviews by alternating between conducting the interviews and transcribing them; or, in other words, the researcher who did not conduct the interview transcribed it. All the transcripts were also read and re-read multiple times while generating the initial codes and searching for themes. As this study focuses specifically on the time spent at a domestic violence shelter, this meant focusing the analytical procedure and the thematization on the living situation when at the shelter.

Before writing the report of the analysis was written, the themes were named and reviewed by re-reading the transcripts to make sure that they corresponded with the content of the interviews. Both authors took an active part in the analysis and, in order to validate the process, both authors reviewed the coding and theming, and discussed the findings based on their analysis without any significant disagreement. In the presentation of the results, each extract was chosen in relation to its depth and clarity, and to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the narratives, focusing on aspects such as safety or support. The results are discussed from a children's rights perspective, as described above.

### Findings

The aim of this study was to analyze mothers' narratives about their children's life situation while living at a domestic violence shelter. The analysis resulted in seven themes: *safety*, *isolation*, *a child-friendly environment*, *shared living space*, *social relations at the shelter*, *children's health during their stay*, and *support at the shelter*, all of which were important for the children's lives during their shelter stay. In the following, the themes and the multifaceted narratives on the children's lives are presented from their mothers' perspectives.

### Safety

Safety is constantly present in all the narratives, often stated in a straightforward manner, but sometimes it is present without being mentioned, as a basic prerequisite for the living conditions at the shelter. Safety thus needs to be addressed and understood as influencing the entire experience of the living situation at the shelter, as Sofia highlighted in her narrative.

What's been particularly important for Adam here is to be able to come to a calm and safe environment. It's like a calm and safe environment, you know, because if it's not calm and safe then you can't process or start anything new.

Sofia emphasized the importance of safety and security, and how these factors influence the ability to feel calm. She also talked about how important it was for her son to come to a calm and safe environment, and that this atmosphere made it possible for him to start processing his experiences. Another example came from Helena:

Yes, I still think about safety at the shelters. Even though it may not have been what we wanted, we've received a lot of support, and a roof over our heads. We've been able to live and sleep together. And we've had a huge amount of time together, which I still think has enabled them to cope with it pretty well. Because we've constantly been with each other, yes, say for eight months. For better or for worse, but still I think it helped them grow a lot as well.

Like Sofia, Helena highlighted the importance of safety at the shelter, but added that it may still not have been quite what they expected. In relation to safety, Helena then described various positive factors of importance, such as the support at the shelter, having a place to stay, being able to stay together, and, even though it was sometimes intense, the chance to spend time together, and that this had helped her children to grow. Thus, safety and security at the shelter were valued by all the mothers as one of the most important factors in their children's lives, that the children were safe and in a place that was free from violence. However, as previously mentioned this affected other aspects of life as well, and the security sometimes also meant isolation.

### Isolation

Living in a shelter after fleeing violence often means that security has to be high, especially during the initial stages. Most of the women and children in this study were also

living with protected identities or secure personal information, and in several cases they had not been able to leave the shelter at all at the beginning of their stay. However, their experiences varied, and in the following examples illustrate how the experience of isolation was described in the narratives. For example, in response to a question on how the escape and the move affected her children, Rebecca says:

Well, they weren't feeling well at all. Because when we lived in the domestic violence shelter, we weren't allowed to go out. We weren't even allowed to look out of the window. That was the case for six months. We were indoors the whole time. And my children... they didn't understand anything. My daughter was only four when this happened and my other [child], I think she was a year old then. They didn't understand what was happening.

Here, Rebecca described a situation of what can be understood as total isolation for six months. She explained that, due to the high security risk, they were not allowed to go outside or even to look out of the window. She highlighted that her children did not understand what was happening and that the isolation had a negative effect on them, that they did not feel well at all. In contrast to this, Sofia described a different experience regarding isolation.

It's a completely different environment. He adapted very well. It's not like many people think, that you get locked up and it becomes like a prison, absolutely not like that. We're able to take care of ourselves, we have our own apartment. We get support and tools [to handle life] here, but then we get... Because without this place, we would never have been able to start over otherwise.

Unlike Rebecca, Sofia explained that she did not experience their living situation as isolation or, in Erika's words, as a prison. Instead, she described herself and her son as adapting well and that they had their own apartment where they could look after themselves. Like Helena, she also highlighted the importance of the support they received, and said that their stay at the shelter had helped them to start a new life. Hence, being forced to live in a domestic violence shelter was described as affecting the children in different ways. For some, it became like a prison, without the opportunity to move freely in society or meet friends, while for others their time at the shelter was instead described as being, despite the isolation, a safe place to start a new life together.

## A Child-Friendly Environment

The living environment at the shelters was mostly described in positive terms and the mothers spoke of a homely environment where the children enjoyed their stay. One of the most important things highlighted for the children was that the accommodation was what can be understood as child friendly. Several different aspects of this child-friendly environment were described in the narratives. One example is given by Jacqueline, answering a question about whether they were missing anything at the shelter:

Well... No, I didn't feel that at the shelter where we stayed. Because, I mean, it was still very homely. So, there was... of course you had your apartment, but there was still the possibility to sit... There was still a courtyard with a playhouse and sandbox and a swing and things like that, and a trampoline for the children. It was activities. There were plenty of activities aimed at the children, as well as the whole family.

Jacqueline emphasized that nothing was missing from the shelter where they stayed, but rather that there was everything that children could possibly need. Firstly, she talked about the importance of homeliness, as mentioned earlier, then she mentioned the play areas, such as a playhouse and a trampoline for the children. She also highlighted activities, for both the children and the whole family, as something positive. A second example is from the interview with Amelia, who was talking about her son's experiences:

It was absolutely amazing. When we first got there, you asked about it earlier, there was a bed made for his age. There were clothes for both the baby and me, hygiene, that's deodorant, shower, creams and... There were iPads, playrooms that would suit all ages so, what were you asking again? (Int: What the environment was like and how it worked for him?) Yes, but it was very well adapted. There were high-chairs. It was well equipped. Then there was, there was stuff that people had left, so it was, maybe the high-chair was a bit rickety, maybe there was a hole in the bib, but there was still stuff. It felt welcoming that it was an adapted environment.

In Amelia's narrative, other examples emerge that demonstrate what a child-friendly shelter can be. In this excerpt, material things that could be important for the experience were mentioned; for example, that there was a high-chair and a cot adapted to her son's age, and that there were clothes for her child and herself upon their arrival. Although she mentioned that some of the stuff might have been broken or

rickety, this did not matter much. The important thing was that there were things for her and her child, and that the shelter felt welcoming.

In the examples above, a child-friendly living environment was highlighted, illustrated by different important aspects. In sum, material things, such as clothing and toys for the children, and play-friendly areas and activities, were highlighted as being of great importance for the children. However, activities were also mentioned as one of the things that were often lacking at the shelters, or that they were not available to the extent desired, as described by Malin below:

I would have liked there to be a bit more [in the way of activities] still. [...] I think there were more activities at the beginning almost, [they] decreased a lot, there could have been some more “fikas.” I think, depending on the ages, you can adapt the activity according to the age and everything like that, so I think they could have been a little better at that. The women’s organization did some, but still not that much if I count how long I’ve been [here] [...] I would have liked there to be a few more activities for the children.

In this case, Malin was describing the time she and her child spent at a shelter run by the municipality, and where the women’s organization helped by, among other things, arranging activities for the children. From Malin’s narrative, it becomes clear that it is not only important for there to be activities, but that these activities need to be adapted to the children’s age and situation, and that they need to be available regularly. This can be understood partly in light of the fact that the activities provided for the children make the isolated life more enjoyable and that it makes it easier for the mothers to go to various meetings; for example, with the police and social services. In addition, the children can process their experiences through play, a subject that is further developed below, in the section on support.

### Shared Living Space

As already mentioned, the living environment was generally described in positive terms, whether it consisted of shared accommodation or a single apartment. Five of the families also had experiences of living in different types of shelters, because they had lived in two or more different shelters. Sharing living spaces, such as a kitchen or living room, was also usually described as positive. It was seen as creating a sociable and supportive environment among the families. However, when the mothers talked about sharing living space with others, they highlighted that the living conditions sometimes felt cramped and that it could be difficult to find space to be on your own, as in Margot’s narrative:

It’s a room where everything is. (Int: Okay.) Kitchen, bed, a table, so it’s very stressful. There’s no space to be on your own, just that space if one takes the bottom and the other takes the top part of the bed. It’s a bunk bed. Then there’s nothing [to do], so that’s why they try to find something else [...] and you notice that it’s hard, and I notice that it’s stressful and wears on them sometimes too.

Margot was describing the one-room apartment in which she and her two children lived at the shelter and how it affected her children. The children shared a bunk bed, which is common for children at the shelters, and the bed was described as the only place where the children could have their own space. The small living space was described as stressful and that it gnawed at them, which is why the children tried to find something else to do. This “other thing” that Margot was talking about could mean, for example, visiting other children’s apartments in the shelter, or spending time in the shared living spaces.

Sharing living space also means taking joint responsibility for activities such as cleaning. This was identified as a problem in the narratives, especially in cases where many families were described as sharing living spaces. Another example is when the apartment or room they were moving into had not been cleaned well enough between residents, as explained by Celine when asked what was important for her children:

Yes, it was the cleanliness, for example. It was because the apartment we ended up in wasn’t clean and then you become... when you’re in a situation like ours, every little thing becomes huge. [...] I didn’t even want to cook there because it was so disgusting. And it was dirty everywhere. It wasn’t carefully taken care of. Like behind the bed, dust, disgusting [inaudible] by the bed. Yes, no, not something we were used to. Nor is it something that I think I should have to see when I’m in trauma, then it should at least look clean.

Celine talked about cleanliness, and how the small things, such as a dirty kitchen or dust behind the bed, become of great importance and something that one does not want to experience when in crisis or undergoing trauma. Sharing living spaces can thus be experienced as difficult and particularly stressful, but the solidarity and support that results from sharing living spaces with others who are in a similar situation was also described as positive.

## Social Relations at the Shelter

Another important aspect that emerged in the narratives was social relations at the shelter, their different meanings, and their impact on the children's well-being at the shelter. This theme is divided into two sub-themes—the mother and the other residents.

### Mother

The children's relationship with their mother was described in all the interviews as positive and of great importance for the children's life situation and well-being during their shelter stay. Sometimes, however, the relationship was described as difficult, especially at first, but the more time that went by and the longer the mother and children spent together, along with support and the opportunity to process their trauma, the better the relationships were described as being. One example was given by Cecilia when talking about the first week:

She became attached to me, some more. I guess that's what changed. She became more attached to me, a bit like a band-aid, and a bit anxious, so when, if someone else shouted at her or scolded her, then she got very scared. But otherwise, she took it great. She thought it was exciting. I did, I was positive outwardly... "oh, now we're going to go out and look at this city and we're going to find all the new playgrounds and exciting parks and find all the fun that can be found here [spoken in a bright, happy voice]." [...] So, she's become more independent and learned to, uh, play on her own, but also to play with other children.

Cecilia described her daughter as becoming very attached to her at the beginning of their stay, in the sense of not wanting to leave her side. This situation appears repeatedly in the narratives; hence, it seems that, initially, the children could not cope with their mother leaving them to take a shower, go grocery shopping, or have a counseling session. This is described as changing, as in Cecilia's narrative, as they spent time together, doing fun things, and having the opportunity to get used to the new situation at the shelter. Cecilia, like other mothers, also described her daughter as becoming more independent over time and learning to cope better without her mother and with the situation at the shelter. The well-being of the mother herself is also important, as the example below, from Rebecca, shows.

A lot of things happened at the same time, with a lot of different authorities, while we lived there. That's common, of course. Then it was, I don't know how to explain it, but the children became braver, I think.

Because they started to feel that I was safe and then they felt safe, I think.

Rebecca described an intense time at the beginning of their stay, filled with meetings with the authorities, but during which the children gradually began to feel safer. This was something that was described as related to the mother's state of mind. Thus, the relationship between mother and child was described as important for the children's well-being, but the well-being of the mother herself was also important. If the mother feels safe, the children also feel safer and, as Cecilia pointed out, are able to be more independent.

### Other Residents

As mentioned previously, living in a shelter can be experienced as cramped if there are a lot of residents at the same time. In the narratives, however, the other residents were described as being very important to the children and their mothers, as the following two extracts illustrate. Firstly, in response to a question regarding what was best for her daughter Jacqueline answered:

I think, for her, it was that it was fun to be able to play with other children. Like that, she had great fun with the other children. I think exactly that... Then it was... The advantage was that she could be together with others, she got to play with other children, there were activities, we were safe. If one of us feels better, the other automatically feels better, to have that support after everything that had happened.

This extract from Jacqueline shows that playing with other children and the feeling of friendship and connection was something that was experienced positively. And, once again, safety, support, activities, and the relationship between mother and child were mentioned: "If one of us feels better the other one automatically feels better." Below, the emphasis on the children's experiences shifts in focus, towards recovery, when Margot talked about what was particularly important for her children:

I notice that, when the children play together, they understand each other in a different way based on the fact that they have similar experiences and, unfortunately, that the other children have also experienced violence. You notice it when they play, and they talk with the children at the shelter about things they've experienced, which they've never done with any of their other friends, so I feel that's very important.

In this extract, Margot not only talked about friendship, but also emphasized the importance of affinity and for the children to be able to share their experiences with other children who have had similar experiences. To have other children around and to be able to play and talk to someone of the same age and with similar experiences was thus described as important, especially because it might not be so easy to talk to children without the experience of violence. Although it can be tough to share difficult experiences, Margot's narrative shows that it can help children to understand that there are others who have experienced similar things.

Even though, in most cases, the other residents were described in positive terms, as in the examples above, sometimes relations at the shelter were described as being difficult for the children. One example is given by Helena, answering a question about whether her children had made friends at the shelter:

Yes, there were a few. But it was very difficult, I also remember, because it felt like we didn't fit in. And the children thought it was a lot of work. There were quite a few children there. I remember my oldest feeling very left out. She kind of didn't get into the group. They thought it was very hard, actually. So sometimes we just kind of stayed in the room, but still you end up trying to socialize, but still she was rejected. She thought it was terrible. Yes, but there were quite a lot of children and they tried to fit in, but it was quite difficult.

Helena described one of her children as having difficulty making friends, and feeling left out. This was described as being very difficult for her daughter, and it also affected their everyday life at the shelter. Although the children were said to have tried to make friends, it did not work. Furthermore, it is important to highlight what a special situation a shelter stay is and that those who live there have fled violence and that they are generally still in the midst of trauma, still not yet having had the time to process their experiences.

### Children's Health During Their Stay

Research has shown that children's health and safety are key reasons why mothers flee with their children to seek support at domestic violence shelters (Jonker et al., 2014). Their children's health can therefore be understood as very important, but arriving at a shelter after being exposed to and/or growing up with violence is not easy, and it affects the children's well-being, as Cecilia's narrative shows.

It's changed now. Two days after we moved [into the shelter], I removed the diaper. No accidents, she just

stopped. It went great and her stomach was better, and I've been able to stop using laxatives. Before, she might need an enema maybe once a month. I haven't given a single one since I left. It hasn't been necessary. [...] I've been able to get her used to milk protein again because that wasn't the problem, it was stress. So she feels much better, both physically and mentally. And here she gets to play. We have a courtyard and there are other children, so she can play with them, however she wants, when she wants. Eh, and you can tell that she's very happy.

Cecilia described the ways in which her daughter's health changed after they left the violence, mainly in the sense that her bowels started to function as they should without laxatives. She also pointed out that her daughter could start drinking milk proteins again, because her symptoms stemmed from the stress of living with violence. From this perspective, fleeing the violence and living at a domestic violence shelter makes children feel safe and their stress levels seem to reduce. This is in line with the other mothers' narratives, which show that, after the initial period at the shelter, which ranged from a couple of days to several weeks, the children became increasingly accustomed to their new existence at the shelter and that their anxiety, due, for example, to fear that their mother would disappear or die, and symptoms of trauma decreased, and they increasingly began to seek contact with the staff and other residents. After a while, they also often began to talk about their experiences and ask questions about the future. However, according to the mothers, this was based on the shelter being a safe place and the children getting support from a children's counselor, or other adults, and having other children to share their experiences with, as Rebecca highlighted.

I remember how happy they were. So, even though we were in this shelter [...] it was like we weren't after a few weeks. After two or three weeks, a month. Because we got, like... The children were free to cry at night. It wasn't like it had to be quiet, quiet, but the children were free. It was really like they saw the children and not just the adults. That's what I love about shelter number one. And they taught [me] how to behave with the children. My girls grew tremendously there. Both mentally and with their health and all that. That's how I remember it.

The development that Cecilia was talking about above was described by Rebecca in different terms, but the children's development and their changed mood are similar. Over time, the children's well-being changed for the better but, unlike Cecilia's focus on the mother-child relationship, the

importance of a safe environment and support from those who were staying or working at the accommodation was made visible. In other words, feeling safe and, for example, being able to cry at night was described as crucial for the children's well-being. Moreover, as previously discussed, receiving support from those who worked at the accommodation was described as important for the children, even though the support mentioned by Rebecca was aimed at her, the mother. The issue of support given to the children is discussed in detail below.

### Support at the Shelter

In domestic violence shelters, the staff have different roles or duties, and among the voluntary organizations only a few people among the staff are employed, while others work as volunteers. In this section, the importance given to the staff who work at the shelters, as employees or volunteers, and the support they give are discussed. The first example is from Amelia's narrative, as she answered a question about what had been the most important thing for her son:

Yes. Yes, but that they're so happy to see him. Yes, but that... They've been so incredibly supportive. I think, he's mostly, as I said, he's been sitting there eating his cake and then they've been giving him fun toys, they've been happy to see him and they're like that. I've understood that one could just as well have ended up somewhere where it's a burden... "Okay, you have a kid too." Like, [here] they've been caring... "How is your child? How are you?" So, if I feel good, the child also feels good.

In this extract, Amelia highlighted several different things, which also recur in the other mothers' narratives, such as the importance of the positive and encouraging atmosphere to which the staff contribute, that the staff take time to sit down with the children and play or listen to what they have to say, but also that they care about the well-being of the children as well as the mothers. The mothers also highlighted the importance of the child's own support person or child counselor, a person often described as being very important for the children's recovery process during their time at the shelter, as shown in Margot's narrative.

They have their own counselor who they've become very close to and she's meant a lot and they feel very safe with her and they've opened up to her. For my son, it was a little easier to open up, it happened faster because he understood a little bit more of the consequences of talking, that it's important for him and that it has consequences for his future. My daughter, who's

six, found it a little more difficult. It took quite a long time for her to build a relationship with the counselor. Although she enjoyed spending time with her, she mostly wanted to play and do other fun stuff with her when they had their sessions, but that [talking] also came in the end. So, it's her they've got closest to or talk about their experiences with.

Margot had a daughter and a son of different ages, six and nine respectively, and she described the relationship with their counselor and the support she had given them as being very important. She explained that how the children related to the counselor and kind of support they were dependent on the children's wishes as well as their age. In summary, the child counselor's role was emphasized as being crucial for the children, giving them a chance to process their experiences and to receive support during their stay at the shelter. However, not all the children were given this form of support; rather, it can be understood as depending on the capacity of the shelter, as Helena's narrative shows:

Then I wish there was more support for the children too, which might have helped my children a little anyway, and maybe not have to start to self-harm like that. Even though she might have done it regardless.

Even so, most mothers talked about their children's improved health and described the support they received during their stay, especially from the child counselors who work at domestic violence shelters, as having been incredibly important. As Helena's narrative shows, there was also a desire for more support, especially from social services, who are the ones responsible for providing support to children living in domestic violence shelters in Sweden, to help the children process their trauma.

### Discussion

The aim of this article was to analyze mothers' narratives about their children's life situation while living at a domestic violence shelter. The results show that safety is the most important thing and that this affects all other aspects of children's lives during their time at the shelter. For example, once they felt safe, their health started to improve and their relationship with their mother grew stronger, a finding that is in line with previous research (Fredland et al., 2014). Based on this, it can be seen that it is not just essential to remove the mothers and children from a home where they are exposed to violence, it is also important to make them feel safe in their new environment. As the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) specifies, children have the right to grow up

in a safe environment free from violence. As discussed further below, safety in this case does not only involve formal safety precautions such as alarms, locked doors, or bullet-proof windows. It is also about feeling at home and being given support.

The support provided for children, for example by having a councilor or a volunteer worker to talk to with or without words, was described as being, after safety, the most important aspect of their stay. The mothers identified the shelters' child councilors or contact workers as being the most important individuals for the children during their stay. Other social relationships that were described as important for the children were those with other children or families at the shelter. The support the mother received was also described as crucial for the children's health; in other words, the well-being of the mother will, in turn, help her children to process their experiences. Furthermore, as Fredland et al. (2014) also highlight, if the children also receive support, their feelings are described as developing from panic and fear at the beginning of their stay to becoming communicative and feeling safer after a couple of weeks.

Previous research has also shown that children themselves appreciate having structured counseling (e.g. Bowyer et al., 2015; Øverlien, 2011). In line with Article 19 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), the states that have signed the convention have a responsibility not only to act to protect children from violence, but also have a responsibility to make sure that children who have experienced violence receive support to process their experiences. In relation to domestic violence in Sweden, a lot of attention has been directed towards the mother, while the children have been seen as simply accompanying her (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2020), rather than being given protection and support in their own right. This does not mean that shelters have not offered support to children, but such support has not been guaranteed or legally protected. This is probably about to change due to legislative changes in recent years, under which children's status as victims has increased.

The mothers also said that the living environment was important—that it felt like a home and that there were play areas and activities for the children—especially considering the isolation that living in domestic violence shelters often entails. Previous research has reported similar results, highlighting the importance of play areas, outdoor space, and structured activities for children (Chanmugam, 2011; Øverlien, 2011). The provision of play areas and the opportunity to join structured activities can be important for children's development and should be understood as part of their right to education and development, especially because they are almost never able to leave the shelter for leisure activities or to attend preschool or school (e.g. Chanmugam, 2011; Vass & Haj-Yahia, 2020). Also, as described above, feeling

at home can be one aspect of feeling safe. Therefore, there needs to be a welcoming and child-friendly environment, including furniture and toys that are adapted to the age of the child. A child-friendly environment also makes day-to-day life at the shelter more bearable and might reduce the feeling of isolation and the prison-like aspects of life at a shelter. It can also facilitate the transition from violence to a new life without violence.

In addition, it is important to raise awareness about children's various ages, situations, different needs, coping strategies, and recovery processes, and to adjust the domestic violence shelter environments and the support provided in relation to these. For example, some children need more support and time than others to recover from their experiences, and some are quite introverted, while others act out. There is also the question of whether it is possible to create a system that protects these children and their mothers in such a way that they are able to live a life free from violence without being isolated in a shelter.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

It is of great importance to deepen the knowledge of what a stay at a domestic violence shelter means for children exposed to violence in order to develop the support and protection provided based on children's needs and rights as victims of crime. The knowledge gained from this study shows that the support given by women's organizations, shelters, and the authorities is crucial (e.g. Theobald et al., 2021). However, the support given needs to be child centered and adapted to individual children's needs, experiences, and wishes. Other important aspects highlighted in the narratives are, for example, that the accommodation is clean, and that there are play areas and activities for the children. Also, the availability of staff, adaptations to provide the most suitable accommodation for each specific family, and adaptations relating to security level are important because these can vary between families. These features can create conditions for reducing discomfort, fear, and security risks for children in connection with a stay at a domestic violence shelter.

A lot of changes related to policy have been made in Sweden in attempts to improve the circumstances of children with experience of domestic violence. Two of the biggest changes involve adopting the UNCRC into Swedish legislation in 2020, and the addition of the crime "Violation of a child's integrity" (Sw. Barnfridsbrott) in 2021. These steps are vitally important, but more is still needed for those children living in shelters. Policymakers all over the world need to acknowledge children's experiences by stipulating the rights that children have when living in shelters; for example, to receive support for themselves, to receive an

education, and to have play areas for recreational time. This can be done by securing the financial situations of the shelters, so they can afford to provide toys, play areas, and educated and experienced staff, and by collaborations between social services, shelters, health centers, and preschools and schools. Children are not just accompanying their mothers to the shelter, they are victims too, and also in need of support and protection.

## Limitations

When reading and interpreting these findings, there are some limitations to keep in mind. Firstly, as in many other studies, the interviews were conducted with adults, in this case the mothers, rather than with the children themselves. It is important to highlight this because more research is needed in which the children's own voices are the focus. To speak directly on subjects regarding their lives, instead of being spoken for, is also an important part of children's rights. Still, this choice was made due to the ethical issues of interviewing such young children, aged 0–6 years, and enabled the study to still, in some way, access their experiences through their mothers' narratives. Secondly, the sample is small, which hinders generalizations. However, the purpose of the article was to gain insight into young children's experiences from their mothers' perspectives while living at a domestic violence shelter. Thirdly, there were no distinctions made between types of domestic violence shelter; in other words, between shelters run by non-profit organizations, municipalities, or private companies.

## Conclusion

All children have the right to be protected from violence (United Nations, 1989) and our study shows that keeping children safe from violence is the most valued aspect of domestic violence shelters. Still, life at a shelter is not easy for young children because it is a new environment with new people, and they have had to leave their former life, social relations and home behind. A child-friendly environment, activities adapted for children of different ages, and support directed toward children themselves are, however, aspects that are shown in this study to be important for minimizing the feeling of isolation and improve children's well-being in this new and unfamiliar situation. At the same time, it is also important to question whether there are other ways to protect mothers and their children from violence, without having to isolate or imprison them in shelters.

**Acknowledgements** We are sincerely grateful to all the women, and thank them for participating and sharing their narratives and their children's experiences with us. We would also like to thank the shelter staff

who gave their valuable time to help us with the project.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Umea University. This work was supported by the Swedish Crime Victim Authority (Brottsövermyndigheten), Grant number 03395/2020. The findings and conclusions are solely the work of the authors, and the financier has not been involved in the research. The analysis and conclusions are those of the authors.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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