

the empty chairs



1. Kampagnens titel: The Empty Chairs

Kunde: Børns Vilkår

Produkt: Children's absence in schools (Denmark)

2. År shortlistet/vundet ved CCA:

Belønning (guld, sølv, bronze, shortliste):

2021, Advertising & Digital Advertising – Events, shortlist

2021, Advertising & Digital Advertising – Promo & Activation, shortlist

2021, Advertising & Digital Advertising – Earned Media, shortlist

3. Executive summary

Released in 2019, *Børns Vilkår's* "skolens tomme stole" report shows 75.000 children in Denmark miss school because of mental health issues.

Addressing the problem, we placed 500 empty chairs in front of the Danish parliament, creating *Børns Vilkår's* most successful campaign.

The Empty Chairs spiralled into cultural conversation, hit the frontpage of *Politiken* and *Berlingske*, were featured in DR1 and TV2 news, and Pia Olsen Dyhr rewrote her speech addressing the subject at the opening of Danish Parliament. **The story reached 2,7 million Danes within 24 hours and generated an estimated media value of +2.000.000 DKK – with zero media investment.**

4. Har du tidligere indsendt denne kampagne i Creative Effectiveness/Creative Impact? Hvis ja, giv venligst et kort referat af casen.

No.

5. Hvad var målsætningen for kampagnen

Børns Vilkår is an NGO offering help and guidance to children. Their mission: that no child in Denmark should experience neglect – neither from their parents nor society. The organizations' vision is hence to give parents, professionals, and politicians the tools and knowledge to understand and prevent when a child is experiencing neglect, abuse or is simply not thriving.¹

To help *Børns Vilkår* achieve their mission, we were tasked with creating awareness around the fact that every single day 75.000 kids are not in school due to a wide range of issues. To tackle that, we didn't just want to talk about the fact; we needed to go further and engage those people that had the power to create change.

The overall objective: creating awareness

The campaign's primary objective was to gain awareness on the rising levels of absence in school, and get the attention of politicians, lawmakers, and adults. We needed to make as big of an impact as possible – on a zero media budget. To do so, we set the following objectives:



The target group

The target audience for the campaign was the 3,5 million adults (18–64-year old) in Denmark. However, looking to maximize adults in Denmark.

overall outcome with a limited budget, we decided to specifically target three segments, that we believed would be most valuable to achieving our objectives.

¹ <https://bornsvilkar.dk/om-boerns-vilkaar/>

Politicians:

To make changes and create an impact we needed to get the attention of the politicians in Denmark. An important segment to target, as it would increase publicity and news coverage, but most importantly – create legislative change. This is a notoriously difficult group to engage with as they are always pressed for time, with a wide range of stakeholders fighting for their attention.

Parents:

There are over half a million parents in Denmark whose kids are still living at home. Parents are an important segment to target because they can relate to the issue first-hand – some might even be personally affected by it.

Professionals:

Companies can support the organization as a sponsor, fundraise- or strategic business partner. This is crucial for Børns Vilkår, as a non-profit organization, whose biggest income is from donations and fundraisers.

The challenges

To achieve our goals, we were faced with two main challenges: One, we needed to reach all three segments, and two, do it in a way that would spark a newsworthy conversation to get us into the biggest news outlets of the day.

One big moment

To reach all three segments at once was a difficult task and the fact that *Børns Vilkår* did not have money for any media investment required a different approach. We needed to develop a straight-forward but bold idea that would provoke a public discourse and be designed to give news outlets some great imagery for both print and film. The following steps were set:

- 1) To successfully reach the three segments with one idea, we needed to find something they all had in common, a shared belief or a common cause.
- 2) We needed to create an “activation” that was powerful enough to own the news headlines for a day.
- 3) The way to get there, was to “highjack” an event, that media and politicians were already interested in. In doing so, we could “borrow” from its existing established capital.

6. Beskriv ideen og arbejdet som sådan - og forklar hvilke kanaler, der blev brugt i eksekveringen

We created an idea that became a powerful visual manifestation of those issues, that kids struggled with, and eventually made them stay home from school. Leaving thousands of classrooms with empty chairs, every day.

The idea

To “borrow” 500 of these chairs and place them outside of Christiansborg on the day of the opening of the Danish parliament – each chair a symbol for a child staying away from school. But to get our point across and connect with politicians and journalist in a more emotional manner, each chair would have one of the reasons why kids were staying at home handwritten on it.

Powerful statements such as: “*jeg isolerer mig selv*”, “*jeg vil bare gerne være glad og gå I skole*”, “*ingen holder af mig*” made people feel the problem in an emotional way and gave voice to a large group of kids that had been largely forgotten.

Background

In 2016, Denmark was announced the world’s happiest country based on high levels of security as well as the safety of our welfare system. However, from 2015-2019 the general well-being of children had been decreasing², a fact that doesn’t fit into the narrative of the happiest country in the world. One out of six children are so unhappy they don’t come to school. These children are absent more than 10% of the time which adds up to a whole year of primary education. Yet at this point no one showed any interest in the thousands of empty chairs.

“Many students have physical indicators showing that they are not thriving in school.”
– *Seismo.dk*

Unfortunately, more than 10% of all children in Denmark are having difficulties in school leading to long periods of absence.³ This is sometimes perceived as laziness,

² <https://uddannelsesstatistik.dk/Pages/Reports/1792.aspx>

³ https://bornsvilkar.dk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Skolefravaars_Rapport_2020_web_print.pdf

but there is almost always a more serious reason, such as mental health, bullying or problems at home.

Many students have physical indicators showing that they are not thriving in school. In fact, 48% of these students with a high level of absences, show physical signs of discontent such as headaches, stomach-aches, or insomnia.⁴

We needed to change this perception and get the problem to the front and center of politicians and news outlets - because every empty chair is a sign of a child in need of help.

Execution

To bring attention to the problematic absences in schools, we placed 500 empty school chairs in front of the Danish Parliament. Each chair represented an absent child and was used as a media to tell their story and the reason behind the absence. True stories were written on the chairs. Bullying, loneliness, mental issues, violence, abuse, and suicidal thoughts are just some of the reasons that so many kids suffer from.

The event was planned in front of the Danish Parliament on its opening day, providing the perfect backdrop to attract the news and broadcasting live. To make this happen we had to apply to host a “traditional” protest and we were later told that this was the first time they had given permission to a protest with no people present.

*Numbers from the “empty chairs rapport” by Børns Vilkår

⁴ <https://seismo.dk/tomme-stole-flere-skole-elever-har-et-bekymrende-hoejt-fravaer/>



Figure 1: Chairs in front of the Danish Parliament on Opening Day

In the very early hours as we were setting up, the interest started to build. First from people passing by, then by “early-bird politicians”, then news media got a hold of the story highlighting the visual opportunity the event provided for both film and print.

Already during the preparations, we received positive and emotional reactions. It seemed like we were not only giving the children a voice, but also providing the public with a steppingstone to share their own experiences and engage in the debate. And as the day got started so did the attention...

Timeline

The campaign itself consisted of a one-day activation, set up overnight in front of the Danish parliament on the opening day, (October 6th, 2020). However, the campaign made headlines, sparked conversation, and created change well beyond one day.

7. Hvad var strategien bag det kreative arbejde?

To translate the objectives into an effective creative strategy we would have to design the activation in such a way that it would be present in all the news media for one day. Making it impossible for central stakeholders to ignore the problem.

Our creative strategy was designed around four key principles:



If we were going to succeed with this ambitious goal, we had to create a conversation that would start at the front steps of the parliament and continue onto the podium at the opening ceremony. The activation was designed in a way that would make the empty chairs nearly impossible to ignore for both politicians and journalists as they would have to pass through them as they made their way into Christiansborg for the opening ceremony.

This was a serious topic, so the tonality of the activation needed to take into consideration that even though we wanted to be heard throughout the land we did not want to be "loud or tacky" in the way we achieved this.

As the day progressed, delegations of politicians gave interviews on the subject in front of the chairs, reading out quotes from the inscription on them. News crews gathered to film for the biggest online and offline media.

Our approach needed to combine two elements:

- **Communicate a complex story in an engaging and simple way**
- **Create as much noise as possible and own the news circle for a day.**

With a brief as complex as this one, it was important to unify the different elements without it getting too complicated. The message should be clear, simple to understand and highly shareable.

Putting up the chairs in front of the parliament was the perfect sweet spot between the two strategic points.

We created a symbol of something that can seem invisible and by writing their stories on the chairs we gave the children a chance to speak directly to the government without being present.

This activist and analogue approach made a lot of noise visually as well as emotionally. The writing on the chairs made the stories come to life and the audience took notice.

8. Hvad var kampagnens umiddelbare kreative impact?

The Empty Chairs activation was designed to engage with multiple audiences and was highly effectful in reaching each of these. It generated massive awareness regarding mental health and absences at school – a topic that had had a difficult time getting the attention it deserved from journalists as well as politicians.

The campaign significantly outperformed all our objectives and set a high standard for what can be achieved when creativity and contextual relevancy is combined.

The Empty Chairs significantly outperformed each of its four objectives⁵:

Reach 33% of 18-65 year olds.

Within the first 24 hours the earned media value generated with The Empty Chairs was estimated to be DKK +2.000.000⁶. **The Empty Chairs reached over 65%** of the Danish population (18-65) with no media budget.

Become the most talked about news of the day.

The activation owned the media news circle and was featured throughout the day on the biggest news broadcasts and prominently at both the 18.30 news on DR and the 19.00 news on TV2 as well as Go' Morgen Danmark and many others. Furthermore,

⁵ See appendix for overview

⁶ Grey Public

both Politiken and Berlingske had the story on their front page and all major Danish news outlets reported the story on their websites and social channels.

Hijack the conversation at the opening of the Danish parliament.

The Empty Chairs became the main subject at the opening of the Danish Parliament. *SF's partiformand* (Party chairman), Pia Olsen Dyhr, even rewrote her speech to address *Børns Vilkår* and the empty chairs in front of the building. One of her main points being that they, as the political leaders, should take responsibility and help the children. Attendees were – amongst others – all the party chairmen including the Prime Minister.

Get the issue on the political agenda.

The opening debate is the biggest debates of the year, often referred to as a “*marathon debate*”, sometimes lasting up to 14 hours. The debate has a strict schedule; each party chairman gets 10 minutes to express the key issues they want to get on the agenda for the upcoming year. **Pia Olsen Dyhr spent more than half of her time expressing the importance of *Børns Vilkår* campaign, reflecting the impact the stunt had as a political statement.** The speech became the most used by news media to show the opening of the parliament.

Moreover, we saw a massive engagement from politicians across the political spectrum, commenting on the event and acknowledging our message. Tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram posts and stories were shared by politicians from all across the political spectrum including names such as; Pia Olsen Dyhr, Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil, Uffe Elbaek, Ellen Trane and the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen.

Lastly, The Minister of Education, Pernille Rosenkrantz-Theil appeared in the news for an interview regarding absences in elementary school, commenting on the empty chairs and promising that additional attention and funds be directed at the issue.

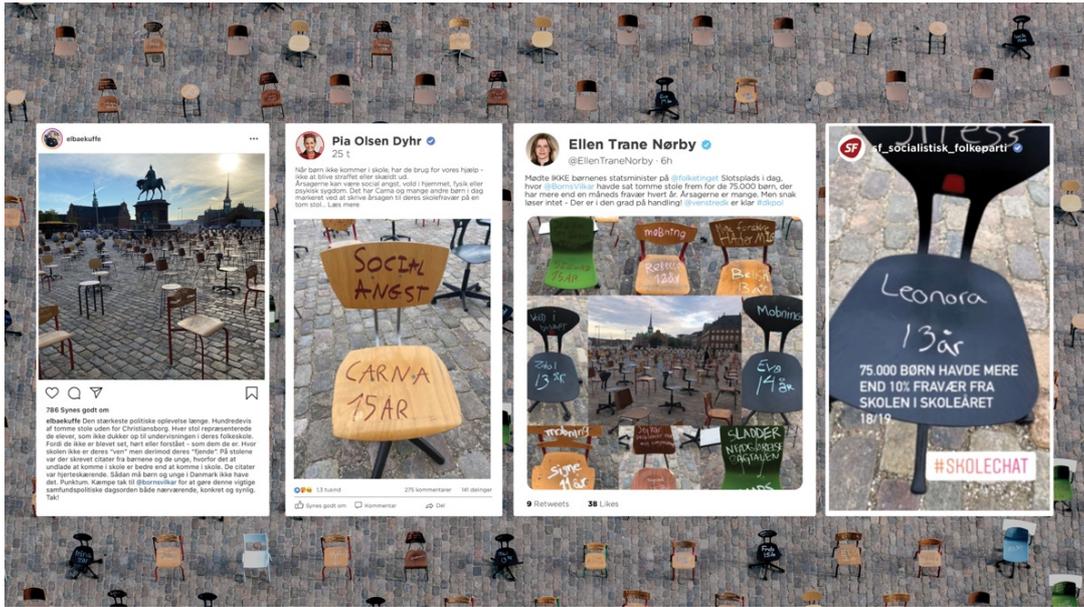


Figure 2: Reactions by politicians on Social Media

After the opening ceremony the minister of education reached out to ask if they could borrow two chairs to be exhibited in the hall of the Danish parliament to remind the politicians of the problem and keep the issue on the political agenda.

After the campaign the government launched the “Children’s First” initiative to help neglected children and delegated an additional 400 million DKK funds to public schools. Although this should not be attributed solely to The Empty Chairs, we do believe that our initiative helped raise awareness of the issue and spark a debate.



Figure 3: Snippets of press coverage

9. Hvilken positiv forskel for samfundet løftede kampagnens kreative impact?

The event has been *Børns Vilkår*'s most successful campaign when it comes to media coverage, creating awareness and engagement regarding children's well-being. The creative impact especially stands out in 3 areas:

Focus on mental health

Since the campaign launched, we have seen an increased focus on mental health in schools and the importance of teaching children about mental disorders.⁷ We have seen a tendency, where more people want mental health as a scheduled course, aligned with physical health that is represented in P.E.

Still relevant today

The Empty Chairs created so much attention that it is still being mentioned a year later. The political party SF referred to the event again in 2021 in a Facebook post⁸, where Pia Olsen Dyhr once again highlighted the importance of acknowledging the issue from the children's perspective, helping those who are experiencing neglect or going through a difficult time. This came in the wake of *Børns Vilkår*'s report for 2019/2020.

Fewer empty chairs

According to Denmark's statistics, the number of absent children in classrooms has dropped since the release of the report and The Empty Chairs initiative⁹. This is also noticeable in the subsequent report from *Børns Vilkår*, as the number of children with more than 10% absences has dropped from 75.000 to 61.000 in the following year.

In conclusion the event helped *Børns Vilkår* move closer to their overall ambition of helping children nationwide.

⁷ <https://www.folkeskolen.dk/1878623/er-maaden-vi-forstaar-mental-sundhed-paa-forkert>

⁸ See appendix for the Facebook post

⁹ According to *uddannelsesstatistikken* the overall absence dropped from 5,9% in 2019 to 5% in 2021. The number of students with more than 10% absence dropped from 14,2% to 11,4% (see appendix)

We successfully fulfilled the communication objective of the campaign, by not only increasing the awareness of the issue, but more importantly sparking a debate and getting the issue on the political agenda.

10. Er der andre faktorer, som kan have haft indflydelse på den kreative impact eller den positive forskel for samfundet?

In the following we will list other external factors that could have affected the reach and impact we generated. These discounting factors might have been contributing factors to the success of The Empty Chairs and the debate it launched.

The academic report

The Empty Chairs activation was designed to build on the release of a scientific report documenting the issue of an increasing absence in Danish schools. The report provided a solid social scientific foundation for which to build The Empty Chairs initiative and created additional interest in the issue.

The political landscape

Supporting the message was a new “absence law” put into motion as a part of the heavily discussed “ghetto-pakke” in 2018¹⁰. The minister of education, Pernille Rosencrantz-Theil, presented this law on absence in elementary schools, where the parents of children with too much absence would lose their child support and thereby a big part of their income.¹¹ In essence this meant that there was already a positive political predisposition towards the issue.

¹⁰ <https://www.information.dk/indland/2020/01/ny-fravaersstraf-kan-koste-familier-boernechecken-rokker-ved-skolens-fundament>

¹¹ <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/boerns-vilkaar-fravaersstraf-er-skaev-symbolpolitik>

11. Skubbede arbejdet til grænserne for, hvordan kreativitet kan gøre en positiv forskel i verden?

The Empty Chair campaign showed that an activist approach combined with a visual interesting, highly dramatic execution and contextual relevancy is able to generate massive media attention and get your message all the way onto the political podium and into the speeches of the most important political day of the year.

With a creative idea base on activism, we showed that creativity can be a powerful tool used to promote complicated issues, spark cultural conversations, and help to bring about change. And that you do not have to rely on a conventional media strategy and investment to own the public discourse.

Just as importantly The Empty Chairs provided a framework to *Børns Vilkår* that will enable them to create more creative and effective ideas in the future to help bring forward a better future for kids of all ages.

Appendix:

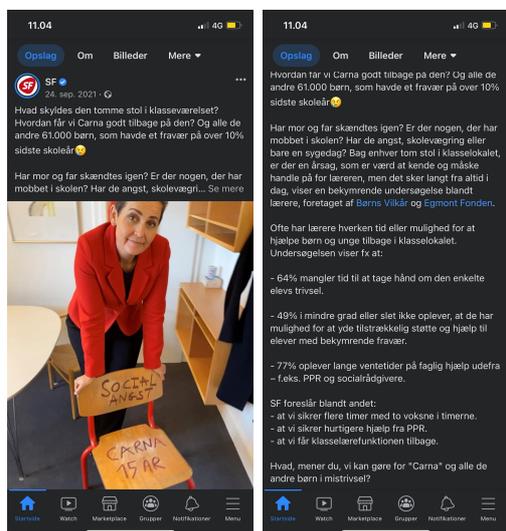
3: Børns Vilkår's income according to annual magazine



7: Overview of Goals and Objectives

Objective	Result
Reach 33% of all adults in Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach over 65% of Danish population with 0 media budget Estimated earned media value: +2.000.000 DKK within 24h
Become the most talked about news of the day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On news at DR, TV2 & Go' Morgen Danmark Frontpage of Politiken & Berlingske Featured on all major Danish news outlets (website and/or SoMe)
Hijack the conversation at the opening day of parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Main topic at the opening of Danish Parliament SF party chairman, Pia Olsen Dyhr, rewrote her speech
Get the issue on the political agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pia Olsen Dyhr spent the majority of her speaking time on "The Empty Chairs" Speech became most used imagery by media to reflect the Opening of the Parliament Massive engagement from politicians across the political spectrum through comments and posts on SoMe channels Minister of Education appeared on news commenting on empty chairs Children's first initiate deleted DKK 400 million to public school to address the issue

9: Facebook Post by SF, 2021



10: Info by Uddannelsesstatistik

