

Early Childhood Education

and Care in Finland





*Photographs by Tuija Hyttinen at
Kelloniemi day care centre, Kuopio*

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM IN FINLAND

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland has two main goals. One is to fulfil the day care needs of children under school age and the other is to provide early childhood education.

Since 1973, the Act on Children's Day Care has provided a framework for the implementation of day care. The Act clearly defines the physical setting for the provision of day care and the educational objectives. According to the act, the objectives of day care promote the balanced development of children together with their parents. For its part, day care shall provide children with safe and warm relationships; activities supporting children's development in a versatile manner, as well as a favourable growth environment based on individual children's circumstances.

Day care in its different forms is the most important area of public ECEC activities. The Finnish ECEC-system consists of municipal and private services. Municipalities must offer day care in the official languages of Finland: Finnish, Swedish and Sàmi. Day care should also support the language and culture of speakers of Romany and children of immigrant background. Municipi-

pal day care is provided at day care centres and in family day care. Several local authorities also organise supervised play activities open to everyone in playgrounds and at open day care centres. The day care fees are based on family size and income level. Families with low incomes are charged no fee. Client fees cover about 15 per cent of the total day care costs.

As of 1996, the parents of all children under school age have enjoyed the right to a place in day care for their child provided by their local authority. Since August 1997, it has also been possible for families to receive a private child-care allowance in order to provide their children with private care.

Pre-school education signifies the systematic education and instruction provided in the year preceding the commencement of compulsory education, which usually commences in August of the calendar year of a child's 7th birthday. Voluntary pre-school education that is free of charge is provided in every municipality since August 2001 at an amount of no less than 700 hours per year.

Since the 1960's the possibility for parents to stay at home to care for their new-born and small children has gradually improved. For this purpose, first maternity allowance and leave is granted and since 1989 maternity, paternity and parental leaves and allowances are available. The

right to keep one's job during care leave is protected by law. In addition, since 1985 parents have been able to arrange the care of their children by means of the child home care allowance. The child home care allowance can be granted immediately after the parental allowance period ends and can be paid until the youngest child in the family is three years old or enters municipal day care.

After the parental leave period, families are therefore provided with three different options until the child begins compulsory school:

1. *Caring for the child at home on care leave and receiving child home care allowance (until the youngest child turns three years)*
2. *Having the child cared for in private day care with the private child care allowance*
3. *Having the child cared for in municipal day care.*

Well-educated and multi-disciplinary staff is one of the strengths of the Finnish day care system. The staff in day care centres is required to have at least a secondary-level degree in the field of social welfare and health care. One in three of the staff must have a post-secondary level degree (Bachelor of Education, Master of Education or



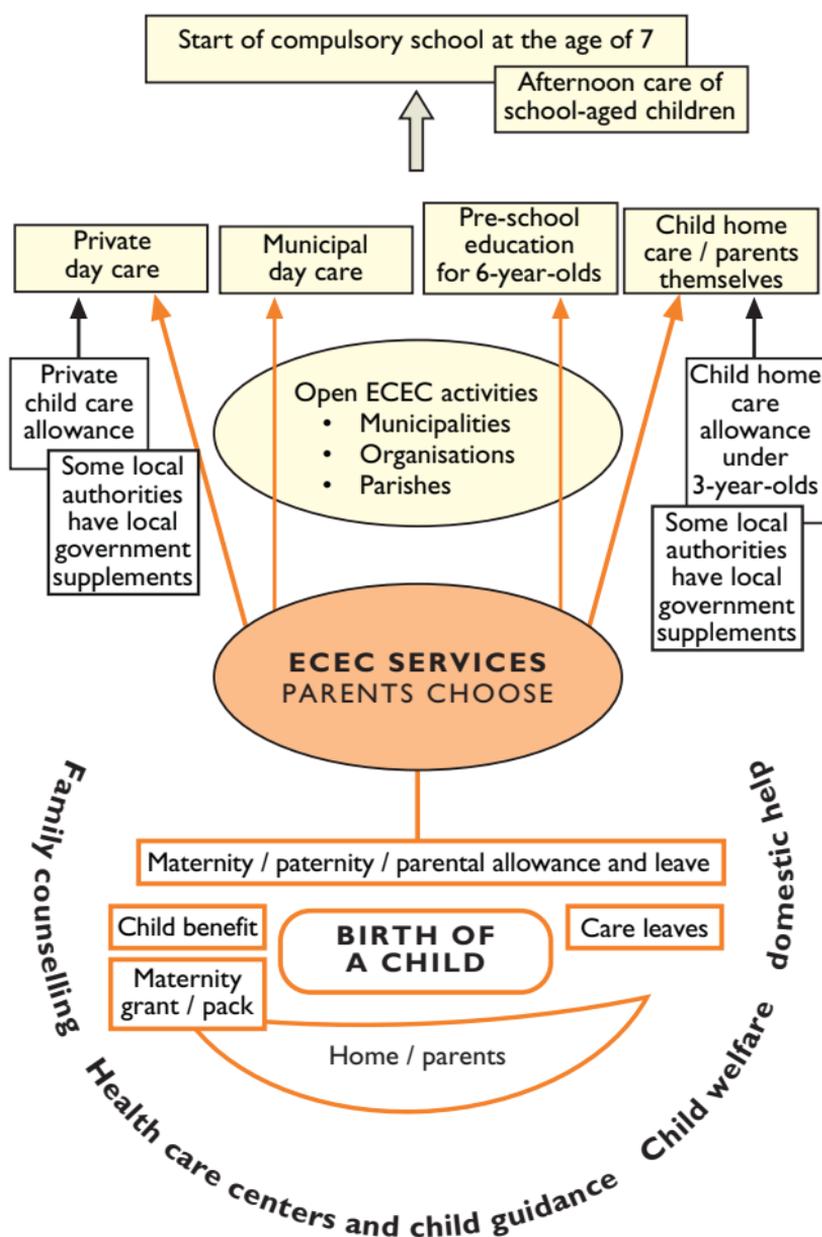
Bachelor of Social Sciences). The adult-child ratio in day care centres is one to seven for 3–6-year-olds and one to four for children under the age of three in full-time day care. When arranging part-time day care the ratio for 3–6-year-olds is one to thirteen and for children under three the ratio is the same as in full-time care.

Family care minders must have appropriate training. The adult-child ratio in family day care is one to four, including the child minder's own children. In addition, part-time care may be provided for one pre-school or school-aged child.

ECEC is realised in co-operation between various actors forming a wide network that provides services for children and families. These

actors include social welfare, health care and education authorities, various organisations and communities that work in favour of children and families and parishes with their ECEC services.

The Finnish ECEC system and the concepts it covers are illustrated in the following figure.



The ECEC system for children aged 0–6 in Finland

EMPOWERED CHILDREN

Finnish ECEC may be described through the concept of EduCare, where care, education and instruction have been combined to form an integrated whole.

ECEC is built on conscious, systematic and goal-oriented interaction and co-operation. Goals are based on a holistic view of the child's growth, development and learning. This view, in turn, is based on comprehensive multidisciplinary information and research and a profound knowledge of ECEC methods.

Growing and learning are understood to constitute a lifelong process. Upbringing at home and in day care forms the foundation for lifelong learning.



THE CHILD

A child is an active learner, whose learning is guided by curiosity, will to explore and joy of realisation. Instead of emphasising the individual nature of growing, communality is brought forward as an important element. The core of learning is not in the information offered being pre-digested from the outside, but in the interaction between a child and the environment. Children's self-motivated play is a natural



way of learning things related to their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

Children in day care must be provided with the special services they need at a sufficiently early stage. Special support in early childhood education and care is usually arranged together with other children, however, ensuring at the same time that the child receives the necessary special services and that the staff have sufficient training. Also a rehabilitation plan should be drawn up for children in need of special care and education.

ROLE OF THE PARENTS

The parents (guardians) bear the main responsibility for the upbringing of their children. Public ECEC services support the parents in the upbringing of the child. The parents choose ECEC services for their children.

Parents and ECEC workers work together as partners to support the child's growth, development and learning. This partnership is characterised by interaction on equal terms, combining the expertise and knowledge of both the parents and the staff.

Parents participate in their child's ECEC and in the planning and assessment of activities. An individual educational plan is made for every child as a basis for co-operation between the day care service and parents.



SOME STATISTICS

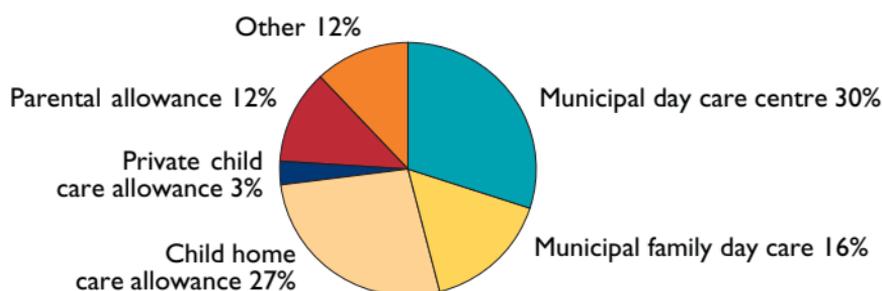
There are about 419 000 children under the compulsory school age of 7 years in Finland. The proportion of these children of the total population has been decreasing constantly and was less than one-tenth (8.3%) in 2000. It is estimated that the proportion will continue to decrease.

About one half of all children under school age make use of municipal day care services. A total of 85% of all children in day care are in full-day care. Further, well over 90% of all 6-year-olds take part in pre-school education, and more than half of these are also in need of day care.

0–6 -year-old-children in municipal day care at the end of 2000

<i>Age</i>	<i>Children in day care</i>	<i>% of the age group</i>
0	784	1.4
1	14 733	25.6
2	22 386	39.3
3	33 112	55.8
4	38 005	62.5
5	42 208	66.8
6	41 625	63.8
Total	192 853	45.9

Day care for children aged 0–6 years at the end of 2000



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