

Early Childhood Education

and Care in Finland



■ MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND HEALTH

Helsinki, Finland 2004



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

3rd revised edition

Layout by AT-Julkaisutoimisto Oy

Printed by Suomen Printman, Hyvinkää 2004

ISSN 1236-2123

ISBN 952-00-1606-6

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM IN FINLAND

Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) covers both the child day care arrangements offered to the families and the goal-oriented early childhood education for children.

The framework for the implementation of ECEC is provided by

- *the Act and Decree on Children's Day Care (1973);*
- *the Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2002);*
- *the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (2003);*
- *the Basic Education Act (1998);*
- *the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (2000).*

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 Sámi. Day care should also support the language and culture of speakers of Romany and children of immigrant background. Municipal day care is provided at day care centres and in family day care. Several local authorities also organise various open activities, such as 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. For low income families

day care is free. Client fees cover about 15 percent 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 childcare allowance in order to provide their children with private care. Over 90% of day care services are municipally provided.

The possibility for parents to stay at home to care for their new-born and small children has gradually improved since the 1960's. In 1964 the maternity leave and allowance were granted and in 1978 fathers got the possibility for paternity leave and allowance. The period of parental leaves is currently about 43 weeks. 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 pe-

riod ends and can be paid until the youngest child in the family is three years old or enters municipal day care. The law ensures job protection during all care leaves.

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.*

All these options are on the national level administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The pre-school reform started in August 2000, and to organise pre-school education became a statutory obligation for the municipalities one year later. Pre-school education as part of ECEC is 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. Pre-school education is provided in every municipality 700 hours annually during the academic year. For families it is voluntary and free of charge. On national level pre-school education is administered by the Ministry of Education.

Since 1st August 2004 the morning and afternoon activities for school children have been included in the Basic Education Act. The National Board of Education has approved the principles for morning and afternoon activities and it has defined the aims and central contents of the activities. In order to receive a state subsidy, municipalities must offer services at least 570 hours annually per child.

Well-educated and multi-disciplinary staff is one

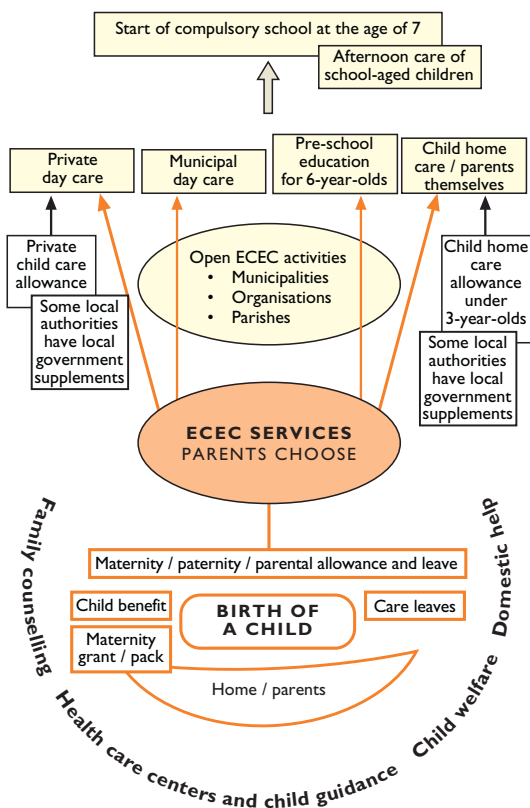
of the strengths of the Finnish system. The staff in day care centres is required to have at least a secondary-level degree in the field of social welfare and health care. One in three of the staff must have a post-secondary level degree (Bachelor of Education, Master of Education or Bachelor of Social Sciences). Pre-school teachers are required to have either a bachelor or master's degree in education, or a bachelor degree in social sciences with an additional pedagogical course. 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 service. When arranging part-time service 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 service. These ratios apply also to pre-school education when provided in day care centres. When pre-school education is provided in schools, the recommendation for the ratio is one to thirteen and the recommendation for the maximum group size is 20. When group size exceeds 13, the teacher must have an assistant with at least an upper secondary level training.

Family child minders must have appropriate training. In practice there is variation in the length and content of the training. In 2000 The National Board of Education presented a recommendation for a new vocational training for family child minders (Further Qualification for Child Minders, 2000). The adult-child ratio in family day care is one to four, including the child minder's own under school-aged children. Additionally, the child minder can provide part-time care 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. 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 personnel has sufficient training.

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

THE CONTENT OF ECEC

ECEC, pre-school education as part of it and basic education form an integrated entity progressing consistently in terms of children's development. The content of ECEC is guided by the National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (2003) and the Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education (2000).

Growing and learning are understood to constitute a lifelong process. Upbringing at home and in ECEC forms the foundation for lifelong learning. ECEC in Finland is seen as a whole comprising the intertwining dimensions of care, education and teaching. These dimensions receive a different emphasis according to the situation, and the age and needs of the child. A good combination of care, education and teaching can promote the child's positive self-image, expressive and interactive skills, and the development of thinking.

According to the National Curriculum Guidelines in ECEC, the principal target of ECEC is to promote the child's overall well-being so as to ensure the best



possible conditions for growth, learning and development. Hence, the child is able to enjoy the company of others experiencing joy and freedom of action in an unhurried, safe atmosphere. The child is interested in the environment, and can direct his or her energy to play, learning and everyday activities with an appropriate level of challenge.

Pre-school education takes into consideration the objectives and contents of other forms of ECEC, on one hand, and those of basic education, on the other. One basic aim is to guarantee equal opportunities for children to learn and start school.

VIEW OF THE CHILD

The child is an active learner, whose learning is guided by curiosity, the will to explore and joy of realisation. The core of learning is in the interaction between children, adults and the environment. To encourage child initiatives, the ECEC environment should be versatile. Nature and the immediate neighbourhood are important elements of the environment. The environment also introduces a range of knowledge- and experience-based elements into the actions shared by children and educators. A rich, flexible ECEC environment enables the use of all senses and the whole body for play, movement, expression, experimentation and insights.

Playing, movement, exploration, and self-expression through different forms of art are ways of acting and thinking peculiar to children. Such activities en-

hance their well-being and perception of themselves and increase their opportunities for participation. An activity that children find meaningful also gives expression to their thoughts and feelings. As educators interact and discuss with children and observe their activities, they also get insights into children's world and thinking. And most importantly, children feel that their explorations, questions, thinking and activity are meaningful. ECEC aims to develop a positive disposition to learning



ROLE OF THE PARENTS

Parents have the primary right to and responsibility for their child's education. They also know their child best. Therefore, the educators have a key role in sharing the day-to-day education and care of the young child with the parents.

In the Finnish ECEC co-operation between the staff and parents has a solid background. The National Curriculum Guidelines seek to emphasise a new, more profound approach – referred to as ECEC partnership

– which involves participation that goes further than co-operation. Consequently, the nature of the relationship between parents and educators is an essential part of the child's well-being. The journey from co-operation to ECEC partnership requires mutual, continuous and committed interaction in all matters concerning the child. The experience of being heard and mutual respect are essential for attaining shared understanding.

Parents are provided with opportunities for discussing their child's education with the whole staff. The partnership approach also aims to enhance co-operation and discussion between parents.

The parents choose ECEC services for their child. They also 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 ECEC service and parents. Also a rehabilitation plan is drawn up for children in need of special care and education.

SOME STATISTICS

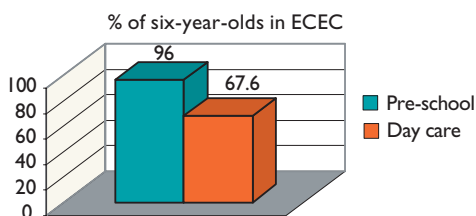
TThere are about 400 000 children under the compulsory school age of 7 years in Finland. The proportion of these children of the total population has been decreasing constantly and was less than one-tenth (7.7%) in 2003. It is estimated that the proportion will continue to decrease.

About one half of all children under school age make use of municipal day care services. A total of 75% of all children in day care are in full-time care.

Children in day-care at the end of 2003

Age	Children in municipal day care (including outsourced services) % of the age group	Children in private day care (according to private care allowance) % of the age group	Total (municipal & private) % of the age group
0	1.3	0.2	1.4
1	24.9	2.6	27.5
2	40.3	3.5	43.9
3	57.4	4.9	62.3
4	63.6	4.9	68.5
5	68.0	5.0	73.0
6	64.1	3.5	67.6
Total	46.0	3.5	49.5

6-year-old children at the end of 2003



In 2003 96% of all 6-year-olds took part in pre-school education, and more than half of these children attended also day care.

Day care arrangements for 0-6-year-old children at the end of 2003

