

Government Resolution

**Concerning the National
Policy Definition on
Early Childhood Education and Care**



The original title: Valtioneuvoston periaatepäätös varhaiskasvatuksen valtakunnallisista linjauksista. Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisuja 2002:9. Helsinki 2002.

ISSN 1236-2050

ISBN 952-00-1354-7

Layout by AT-Julkaisutoimisto

Printed by Kirjapaino Keili Oy, Vantaa Finland 2003

Summary

Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care. Helsinki, 2003. 28pp. (Publications of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, ISSN 1236-2050; 2003:9) ISBN 952-00-1354-7.

Preparation of the Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care was included in the Target and Action Plan for Social Welfare and Health Care 2000–2003 approved by the Government.

The central principles and focuses of development in Finnish early childhood education and care have been gathered together in the national policy. Early childhood education and care is a part of life-long learning. The primary right and responsibility for nurturing and educating children lies with their parents. Society's role is to support parents in exercising their responsibility in this area. The process of caring for, nurturing and educating children should form a seamless whole which flexibly supports the individual development of each child. The aim is to develop the service system from the point of view of children and their families. The policy definition lays stress on the importance of cooperation between different administrative bodies in the organization of early childhood education and care services for children and families and emphasizes the educational partnership between parents and staff. It also lays the basis for a new tool for steering the content of early childhood education and care throughout Finland: the early childhood education and care plan.

The national policy presents proposals for action, including legislative reform, development of national steering for early childhood education and care, maintenance and reinforcement of the professional competence of personnel and development of monitoring and evaluation for early childhood education and care. Another aim of the policy definition is to encourage the municipalities to draw up similar policy definitions, for example as a part of municipal strategy on children and families.

The Resolution was prepared by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in cooperation with the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES). The views of the Ministry of Education and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities were also taken into account. The Resolution is based on material provided by STAKES (DN:o 75/59/2000), which was in turn put together through widespread cooperation involving the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, trade unions in the sector, experts on early childhood education from the universities and polytechnics, and other cooperating parties.

Key words: child care, children's daycare, early childhood education and care, pre-school education

Preface

The primary responsibility for children's education and welfare lies with their parents. The role of society is to support them in this task. The most common and familiar form of early childhood education is children's daycare in its various forms. In addition to daycare, early childhood education, and by extension parenting, also benefits from a broad spectrum of support for early childhood education and families with children provided by the social welfare, health care and education authorities. This is also complemented by the early education activities of local church parishes or other non-governmental organizations.

The Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care presents the main principles and areas of development in public provision of early childhood education. The aim is to foster uniform implementation of early childhood education throughout Finland and help to shape early childhood education, preschool education and basic education into an integrated educational package. The key areas of development are reform of the legislation on children's daycare, the drawing up of a national plan for early childhood education and measures to develop research on early childhood education, staff training and methods of quality assessment. Cooperation will be facilitated by the appointment of a team of experts on early childhood education representing the various interested parties. Another aim of the policy definition is to encourage the municipalities to incorporate early childhood education into their programmes on children and families.

The aim of early childhood education is to meet the needs of children and their families. Its function is to foster the healthy growth, development and learning of our children. It must provide all children with equal opportunities to develop according to their own capacities. An educational partnership between parents and early childhood education staff, based on the needs of the child, is essential to the successful achievement of this goal. We shall also need to develop cooperation between early childhood education services and the existing network of child health clinics. Children learn by playing and doing, and they grow and develop through social interaction. As well as providing support for individual development, it is also vital to guide children in developing their social skills. Early childhood education must also take account of children's possible need for special support, learning difficulties, linguistic and cultural background, or even the different needs of boys and girls.

The national policy definition stresses the importance of cooperation between different administrative bodies and others involved in early childhood education,

and the introduction of new ways of working. The operating practices of early childhood education services should give families a chance to develop their own social networks, which can emerge naturally from joint activities, dialogue and interaction involving children and their parents. This will also foster a sense of community and shared responsibility.

Helsinki, February 2002

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Contents

Preface	4
Introduction	7
1. Early childhood education	9
2. Early childhood education services and support for families with children	10
3. Changes in the operating environment	13
4. Principles guiding early childhood education	15
5. Proposed actions	19
Appendix 1	25
Appendix 2	26

Introduction

The Government Resolution Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care was issued by the Government on February 28, 2002 under the Government Rules of Procedure.

The document sets out the key principles and guidelines for development of publicly provided and supervised early childhood education and was adopted by the Government in line with recommendation No. 55 of the Target and Action Plan for Social Welfare and Health Care 2000–2003 approved by the Government on October 28, 1999.¹ The primary responsibility for nurturing and educating children lies with their parents. Society's role is to support parents in exercising their responsibility in this area.

The aim of the document is to further development of the content and quality of early childhood education throughout the entire service and support system established to support children and their families before the commencement of compulsory education.

Special emphasis lies on influencing the quality of early childhood education, achieving an educational partnership between parents and staff, and establishing cooperation between child health clinics, daycare, preschool education and basic education. The aim is to get all the services provided for families with children to adopt the child- and family-centred goals, operating practices and cooperating procedures of early childhood education. The overall service provided in early childhood education can in this way be determined by the individual needs of each child and family.

An international evaluation² rates the Finnish system of service and support for families with children and early childhood education highly in respect of quality in terms of access, variety, staff training and parental choice. The strength of Finnish daycare and preschool education is that the process of caring for, nurturing and educating children is implemented as a seamless whole. A particular challenge for daycare is for it to be seen as an important service for the child as well as the parent, and one which in addition to good basic care also provides an opportunity for play and learning amongst children of the same age.

Early childhood education is a part of lifelong learning. The process of caring for, nurturing and educating children should form a seamless whole which flexibly

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- 1 Target and Action Plan for Social Welfare and Health Care 2000–2003. Government decision. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Publications 1999:16.
 - 2 OECD Country Note: Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Finland. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Publications 2001:10.

supports the individual development of each child at every stage of the child's growth and education. A national plan for early childhood education is to be drawn up based on the policy definition, with the function of guiding the implementation of content and quality in early childhood education throughout Finland. The plan for early childhood education and the national core curriculum for preschool and basic education will form an integrated national package for fostering children's growth and learning.

An additional aim of the national policy definition is to encourage the municipalities to draw up similar policy definitions, for example as a part of municipal strategy on children and families. A further aim is for the municipalities to develop early childhood education by preparing local early childhood education plans based on the national plan for early childhood education in similar vein to the local education departments' preparation of local curricula based on the national core curriculum.

Funding for the measures recommended in the national policy definition will be decided along with overall spending limits and the Budget.

1. Early childhood education

Early childhood education means children's educational interaction in different settings with the aim of fostering the child's healthy growth, development and learning. The primary right and responsibility for nurturing and educating children lies with their parents, and public early childhood education services merely support the work carried out by parents in the home. Parents select the early childhood education services they require for their children.

Publicly provided and supervised early childhood education comprises an integrated package of care, nurture and education. It involves systematic, goal-directed interaction and cooperation in which free play is the key element. It is rooted in a holistic view of children's growth, development and learning based on a broad spectrum of multidisciplinary knowledge and research plus expertise in the methods of early childhood education.

Daycare in its different forms is the predominant operating environment for public early childhood education. As a component in early childhood education, preschool education involves systematic nurturing and education for the year preceding the commencement of compulsory education. Early childhood education, the preschool education that forms a part of it, and basic education in the schools together constitute a coherent package which progresses logically from the perspective of children's development. The sphere of early childhood education also covers children of school age who use early childhood education services.

Fundamental to the success of early childhood education is dialogue and educational partnership between children, staff and parents. Early childhood education will be implemented in cooperation with a broad network serving the needs of children and families and involving the participation of social welfare, health care and education authorities plus a range of organizations, associations and church parishes involved in work with children and families and providing their own early childhood education services.

2. Early childhood education services and support for families with children

The system of service and support for small children and their families is administered by the social welfare, health care and education authorities. It offers a variety of services and provides scope for choice.

Early childhood education services constitute the key operational entity and consist of municipal or private daycare and preschool education plus other early childhood education activities. The latter include clubs run by the local church parishes and other non-governmental organizations and the various forms of open early childhood education activities organized by the municipalities for children and their families. These services and the rest of the service and support system for children and families operate as an integrated whole that provides support for early childhood education and at the same time for parenthood.

Society provides support to help parents take care of newborn babies and small children themselves at home. The system of support includes maternity, paternity and parental leave and allowances and care leave.³ Families can receive home care allowance⁴ for taking care of their children at home until the youngest child in the family reaches the age of three.

From the point of view of children's growth, development and learning, the key basic services are the child health clinics, daycare, preschool education and the schools. It is vital to develop mutual cooperation between these services and their interactive cooperation with families on the basis of shared values.

Almost all families use the services provided by prenatal and child health clinics. In recent years, the clinics have focused particularly on parenthood and the psychosocial development of children. Clinic staff are expected to discuss with parents the early childhood education services available in the municipality and the opportunities these provide for fostering children's wellbeing in cooperation with their parents.

Under the law on children's daycare,⁵ at the end of the period of parental allowance parents are entitled to a place for their child in municipal daycare either in a daycare centre or in supervised family daycare until the child goes to school. The municipalities are also under a statutory obligation to arrange daycare where necessary for older children. Other early childhood education activities are also arranged at municipal level; participants include children being cared for at home and their parents, family care minders and the children under their care, and small children who are already attending school.

3 Health Insurance Act 364/1963 and Employment Contracts Act 55/2001.

4 Act on the Child Home Care Allowance and the Private Care Allowance 1128/1996.

5 Act on Children's Daycare 367/1973.

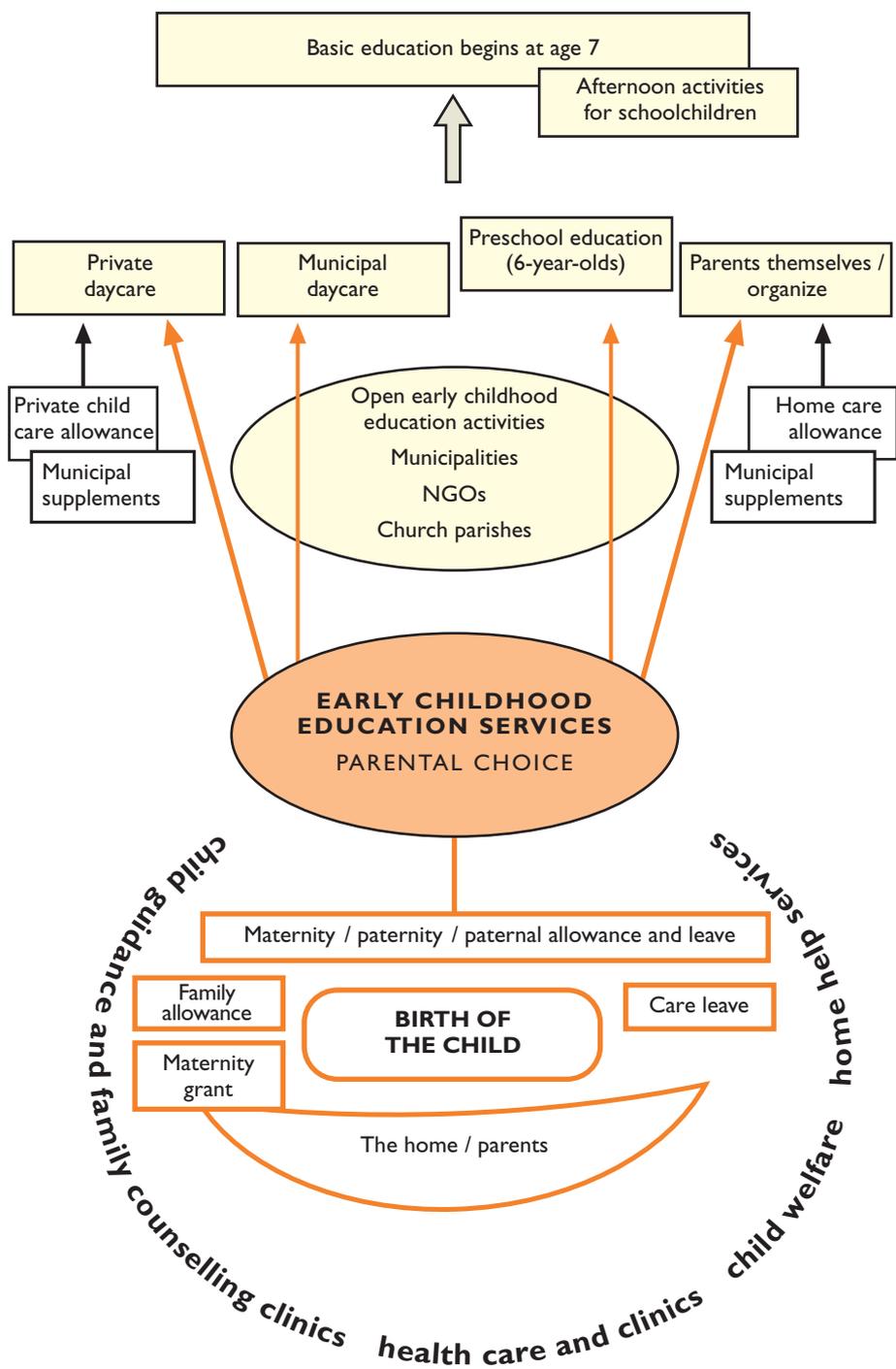


Figure 1. Early childhood education and the Finnish service and support system for families with children

Children's daycare is an early childhood education service which combines the child's right to early childhood education and the parents' right to a daycare place for their child. The central function of daycare is to support the parents in nurturing and educating their child. This places a stress on the early provision of support and by extension underlines the importance of preventive action. Such a universal service system intended for all families with children also allows families who need it to be referred to special services. These include child welfare services, child guidance and family counselling clinics, home care services, mental health services and social work services for intoxicant abusers. The service system as a whole also has to take account of the possibility of chronic illness or hospitalization of a child of early childhood education age.

As an alternative to home care allowance and municipal daycare, families have the option of arranging private daycare for their children with the support of statutory private child care allowance.⁶

Preschool education is provided in accordance with the Basic Education Act.⁷ According to the Government Rules of Procedure,⁸ preschool education comes under the remit of the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. In many municipalities preschool education is arranged in cooperation between the municipal social welfare and education authorities in both daycare centres and schools. Under the Basic Education Act children are entitled to at least 700 hours a year of free preschool education based on parental choice to begin as a rule one year before the commencement of compulsory education. The municipalities prepare their own local curricula based on the national core curriculum for preschool education approved by the National Board of Education.

As local residents, parents both need and are entitled to information on municipal early education services and non-municipal services for children and families so they can choose the most appropriate service to suit their own child and family situation. The effectiveness of the system of service and support for families with children should be assessed from the point of view of the needs of children and their families. Assessment should be made both of the system as a whole and from the perspective of the various services and forms of support. The development of services tailored to the needs of children and their families will benefit if parents and children are given an opportunity to participate in the planning and implementation of services and in assessing their effectiveness.

Municipal strategies on children and families are a useful tool for fostering cooperation between different administrative bodies in the municipality. They allow a multidisciplinary analysis of childhood and the needs of local families with children from the perspective of the different administrative bodies and also facilitate agreement on the development objectives for the municipality's early childhood education services and the targeting of resources.

6 Act on the Child Home Care Allowance and the Private Care Allowance 1128/1996.

7 Basic Education Act 628/1998.

8 Government decree amending the Government Rules of Procedure 738/2001.

3. Changes in the operating environment

The present era is marked by all sorts of changes in society. A vigorous debate has emerged on children's wellbeing and the role of parenthood, and also on the responsibility of society as a whole to take care of the health and wellbeing of families and support parents in the task of nurturing and educating their children. New types of family have become increasingly common alongside the traditional family. At the same time, many families now have fewer contacts outside the family than they used to have. Changes in working life — such as moving to another area in pursuit of work, the accelerating pace of work and increasing job insecurity — and unemployment itself have altered the lives and living conditions of children and their families. The impact of globalization is also reflected in the daily lives of increasing numbers of children. Changes in the environment in which children are growing up have an impact on children's wellbeing and also on the types of services required to help children grow up in a healthy way.

The proportion of the population made up of children under school age has been in continuous decline in recent years. In 2000, children under school age accounted for less than a tenth (8.3%) of the total population.⁹ The birth rate is expected to decline still further with couples waiting until they are older before having their first child.

From the perspective of organizing services an important change took place in the early 1990s when the reform of the system of central government grants gave the municipalities greater freedom and responsibility for service development. This strengthening of municipal self-government brought a reduction in normative steering by central government, with the emphasis shifting more towards steering by the provision of information.

In children's daycare, legislation is still the key steering mechanism, with minimum requirements being set by law. A move has been made towards encouraging cooperation between different administrative bodies by proposing a relaxation in the regulations governing the administrative arrangements for daycare at municipal level.¹⁰ New tools are, however, required for steering the content of early childhood education. The report of the Committee on Educational Objectives in Daycare,¹¹ which has guided the development and implementation of early childhood education nationally, dates back to 1980.

9 Uusitalo, H & Parpo, A & Hakkarainen, A. (eds.) 2000. *Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon palvelukatsaus 2000*. (Review of social welfare and health care services 2000 [in Finnish only]) Raportteja 250. STAKES.

10 Government proposal to Parliament for amending section 6 of the Social Welfare Act (124/2001).

11 Report of the Committee on Educational Objectives in Child Daycare Committee report 1980:31.

The ongoing changes in society are also reflected in children's daycare. The general picture at the moment is bright. Provision is comprehensive, with trained staff and premises that are as a rule of good quality. The problems that exist are in respect of day-to-day provision (e.g. large groups of children and the adequacy of staff numbers in relation to the numbers of children), the health of children in daycare, and the ability of the system to meet the demand for special support. Another cause for concern is the need to develop cooperation between parents and staff involved in early childhood education.

There are problems with staffing numbers, and the arrangements for substitutes in the event of absence are inadequate. In daycare centres the children are often in large groups, and the sense of restlessness is increased by the turnover in both children and staff. The lack of a stable environment can lead to the spread of behavioural problems among the children, while children in large groups are also more prone to becoming ill. The pay in family daycare is dependent on the number of children. Currently active family care minders are getting older, and fewer and fewer new family care minders work at home. This contrasts with the increasing popularity of group family daycare.

However, parents are often looking specifically for care provided in the care minder's own home, particularly in the case of very small children or for families where the parents are on shift work. It is important to ensure the continued availability of this form of care.

Children's development is safeguarded by a healthy and peaceful environment supportive of development and learning. In daycare, this should be pursued by influencing the planning and implementation of activities, structural factors relating to the groups of children in daycare — including adequate provision of competent staff — and the continuity of human relationships between adults and children and between the children themselves. It is also vital to ensure the comprehensive provision of early childhood education support services such as special education, speech therapy and mental health services.

The changes in working life during the 1990s led to increased demand for evening, night and weekend care. The irregularity of demand for care poses a whole range of challenges for children's daycare if we are to secure the healthy growth of our children. Efforts to reconcile work and family life should continue, with the focus on the needs of the child and making it possible for parents to function effectively as parents.

We must ensure the professional competence of staff if we are to meet the challenges presented by the ongoing social changes and the results of research into children and learning. At present, there are considerable differences between municipalities in respect of the opportunities for staff to participate in continuing education or receive mentoring. New forms of working are also required in order to boost cooperation between the various early childhood education services and between early childhood education and other areas of social welfare and health care and the schools. Early childhood education should also be equally represented in information society development work and the related impending change in the operating environment.

4. Principles guiding early childhood education

Finnish early childhood education is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹² constitutional provisions on fundamental rights¹³ and other national legislation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges State parties to ensure children a fair share of the available resources, ensure their right to participate in proceedings affecting them and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, and ensure they receive the necessary protection and care. The Convention stresses that the best interests of the child are to be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. The rights of the child recorded in the Convention must be implemented in the lives of each and every child in the population.

Of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of Finland, the most important in relation to implementing early childhood education are equality, the inviolability of human dignity, guarantees to the freedom and rights of the individual, freedom of religion and linguistic and cultural rights. The text of the Constitution specifically mentions that children must be treated equally as individuals and allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development. The public authorities also have to support families and others responsible for providing for children so that they have the ability to ensure the wellbeing and personal development of the children in their care. These constitutional provisions constitute a positive obligation on the part of the authorities to act so as to foster children's healthy development.

A number of Government resolutions have also set out policy definitions containing implicit obligations for the implementation of early childhood education. These include the Resolution for a Government Programme on Immigration and Refugee Policy,¹⁴ the Government Resolution on Measures for Promoting Tolerance and Combating Racism,¹⁵ the Government Resolution on the promotion of ecological sustainability¹⁶ and the Government Resolution on the Health 2015 public health programme.¹⁷

12 Convention on the Rights of the Child (SopS 60/1991).

13 Constitution of Finland (731/1999).

14 Resolution for a Government Programme on Migration and Refugee Policy, 1997.

15 Government Resolution on Measures for Promoting Tolerance and Combating Racism, 1997.

16 Government Programme for Sustainable Development. Government Resolution on the promotion of ecological sustainability, 1998.

17 Government Resolution on the Health 2015 public health programme, 2001.

The Children's Daycare Act and Children's Daycare Decree¹⁸ provide the statutory framework for children's daycare and the early childhood education provided in daycare and define the minimum operational standards. Preschool education is a part of early childhood education and is covered by separate legislation.¹⁹ When preschool education is provided in a daycare centre, it is also covered by the legislation on daycare.

Children's daycare is a basic service that the municipalities are under a statutory obligation to provide and is funded primarily by taxation. Society's role is to ensure the availability of good quality daycare for all children irrespective of their family's socioeconomic position or other social status or the area in which they live. A broad range of daycare services must be provided, and the municipal authorities must ensure the equitable development of the different forms of service. There may, however, be differences between municipalities in accordance with local conditions and the needs of local residents. Charges for service users are earnings-related and low-income families are entitled to free daycare services.

Participation and influence by service users is emphasized in the Local Government Act,²⁰ the national recommendations on quality management in the social welfare and health care sector²¹ and the Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients (Social Welfare Clients Act).²² The purpose of the Social Welfare Clients Act is to foster a client-centred approach and confidentiality in the client relationship and promote the client's right to good service and treatment in social welfare services. The clients of children's daycare are the parents and, especially, the children. The right to daycare guarantees children equal opportunities to participate in early childhood education if their parents so wish. At the same time, it also allows their parents to go out to work and/or study. Currently prevalent theories of the child and children's way of learning steer the practices and methods pursued in early childhood education and shape the overall learning environment.

The children in early childhood education

Early childhood education is a process that fosters a child's growth, development and learning, and in which the child is an active participant. The child learns together with adults and other children in an environment consciously and purposefully designed to facilitate growth and learning. Quality early childhood education

18 Children's Daycare Act (36/1973) and Children's Daycare Decree (239/1973).

19 Basic Education Act (628/1998, amended 1288/1999).

20 Local Government Act (365/1995).

21 Quality management in social welfare and health care for the 21st century. National Recommendation. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES), Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities.

22 Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients (812/2000).

smooths out differences due to the children's home environment and in this way gives all children the chance to develop according to their own capacities.

- *Children have the right to a safe and secure living environment, care, attention, growth and learning irrespective of where they live, their social and cultural background or their ethnic origin.*
- *Each child should receive any special care, nurturing and teaching they may need. All children have the right to feel accepted, and special education should be implemented as far as possible in conjunction with general early childhood education.*
- *In planning and implementing early childhood education, care should be taken to ensure ethnic and gender equality while also taking account of the developmental differences between boys and girls.*
- *Children's own views should be taken into account in early childhood education to a degree corresponding to their age and level of development.*
- *Children have a right to their own mother tongue. Early childhood education should support children in learning their mother tongue and support children of other tongues in learning Finnish or Swedish.*
- *Every child has the right to their own culture. The children of cultural minorities should have the opportunity to grow up as members both of their own culture and of Finnish society.*
- *Play is a child's most important activity. Early childhood education should provide opportunities for play and a wide range of activities both with other children of the same age and with adults.*
- *Early childhood education should provide children with the opportunity to develop safe bonding relationships. This is a basic requirement for personal development and the foundation of positive growth and learning.*
- *The growth and learning environment in early childhood education should be physically, psychologically, cognitively and socially appropriate to the needs of early childhood education.*

The parents in early childhood education

The primary right and responsibility for nurturing and educating children lies with their parents. An educational partnership and cooperation between children, staff and parents is a fundamental component of good early childhood education.

- *Parents should be provided with information on public early childhood education services and the role of these services in caring for, nurturing and educating young children.*
- *Parents should themselves select the environment for their children's early childhood education.*
- *Parents should work in partnership with early childhood education staff to support the growth, development and learning of their children. Interacting on a basis of equality, the two parties to this educational partnership can bring together the different expertise and knowledge they both possess. Parents should be allowed to participate in the early childhood education of their own children outside the home, and in planning and assessing it.*
- *Parents should be afforded greater opportunities for forming independent peer and support groups and for influencing the implementation of early childhood education.*

The staff in early childhood education

Early childhood education characteristically involves multidisciplinary cooperation. The professional competence of staff also extends to cooperation with a broad network of fields serving children and their families and including social welfare, health care and education authorities and a variety of different organizations, associations and church parishes involved in work with children and families.

- *The most important resource for early childhood education is a professionally competent staff capable of cooperation. Care should be taken to ensure adequate staffing levels and the proper training and wellbeing of the staff in early childhood education.*
- *Staff should be able to identify the need for special support for the children in their care and have access to the expertise required to take care of children needing such support.*
- *Early childhood education requires seamless cooperation between different professional groups. This cooperation should take place both in working early childhood education units, where staff with different educational backgrounds can work together, and as cooperation with other parts of the system serving children and their families. Each member of staff can contribute to early childhood education according to their own field, training and expertise.*
- *Early childhood education staff should be able to prepare the ground for cooperation between daycare and the home and increase participation by parents.*
- *Early childhood education staff are also responsible for ensuring the continuity of growth, development and learning by the children in their care and securing cooperation between the staff in daycare, preschool education and the schools.*
- *Another responsibility of early childhood education staff is to cooperate with the social welfare and health care staff. Staff should support parenthood and the nurturing role of the home, provide information on the available service and support systems for families, and where necessary encourage their use.*

5. Proposed actions

If we are to achieve quality early childhood education with a properly developed content, an effective steering system is an absolute must. At the present moment, the most important tool for steering early childhood education is the Children's Day Care Act, which governs the provision of children's daycare. Financial support for arranging for the care and nurturing of small children after the period of parental allowance is provided for in the Act on the Child Home Care Allowance and the Private Care Allowance. Provision of preschool education is based on the Basic Education Act.

- **The legislation on children's daycare should be reformed on the basis of the principles guiding early childhood education**

We need a flexible range of early childhood education services in order to foster the healthy growth of our children while taking account of the different needs and situations of children and their families. As a form of activity, early childhood education is an integrated package comprising care, nurture and education, and it is essential to ensure the development of all three of these areas.

Children's daycare is an early childhood education service that meets both the child's right to early childhood education and parents' right to a place for their child in either a daycare centre or supervised family daycare. The operation of both these forms of daycare must be secured in a way that preserves and further develops the special features and strengths of both.

As well as daycare, there is also a need to develop other early childhood education activities where participation would be more open. This would provide an important service for children being cared for at home and their parents, family care minders and the children in their care, and young schoolchildren.

The objectives for early childhood education need to be more clearly linked to lifelong learning as a part of our society's other generally agreed objectives for childraising and education. The legislation should also foster a child- and family-centred approach, cooperation between different early childhood education services, and networking with other services targeted at families with children.

In order to further quality control in early childhood education, the legislation should include provision for a national plan for early childhood education to serve as a basis for the local early childhood education plans to be drawn up by the municipalities. The legislation should also include mention of continuous assessment of early childhood education activities.

In the area of children's daycare, the legislation should continue to include the parental right to a daycare place for their children. The objectives for childraising and education should indicate more clearly than at present the role of daycare in fostering the care and comprehensive growth and learning of our children. They should also emphasize the opportunity provided by daycare for preventing and correcting any retardation in development. The provisions should also stress the importance of cooperation between parents and staff.

The legislation should guarantee all children the opportunity for healthy growth and ensure daycare has the resources to provide special support for children who need it. A child can be in need of special support in the areas of physical, cognitive, emotional or social development. Conditions at home can also lead to a need for special support. Daycare providers need to have sufficient expertise to identify children's needs and organize the necessary support measures.

The provisions on staffing levels and numbers of children should be adjusted to ensure a healthy, peaceful and secure environment for growing children that allows the development of warm, stable relationships. They should also address the question of whether there is a need to provide separately for staffing levels in daycare arranged in the evenings, at night and at weekends.

Responsibility for drafting the legislative reform lies with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

- **A national plan is needed for steering the content and quality of early childhood education**

A national plan for early childhood education will steer content development for early childhood education throughout Finland. This will increase quality equality between municipalities and between the various units providing early childhood education within individual municipalities.

The objective of lifelong learning enjoys broad approval in Finnish society. Instead of lowering the age at which children start school, children's ability to learn is to be enhanced by developing the content of early childhood education with the help of the national plan for early childhood education. The tools for steering the content of daycare, preschool education and basic education in the schools should constitute an integrated package capable of supporting the healthy development, growth and learning of our children.

The national plan for early childhood education should define the values, function and objectives of early childhood education, the concept of the child and learning to be applied in early childhood education, what constitutes a good educational and learning environment, the methods and operating modes of early childhood education, the importance of the different activities of early childhood education to the wellbeing of the child, and the provisions for monitoring and assessing activities.

The plan should cover the various service forms of publicly organized and supervised early childhood education and describe their specific features and strengths as an environment for children to grow in. It should also encompass the implementation of early childhood education for children suffering from a chronic illness or otherwise needing special support and children of minority cultures. The plan should be drawn up with a view to furthering cooperation between the various parties involved in early childhood education. It should also seek to ensure a seamless continuum between early childhood education, preschool education and basic education in the schools.

The national plan for early childhood education should serve as the basis for municipal early childhood education plans, and for plans at both unit level and the level of the individual child. The latter are to be drawn up in compliance with the Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients²³ individually for each child in daycare in cooperation with the child's parents or guardians, and implementation is to be assessed at regular intervals.

The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) will draw up the national plan for early childhood education in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and other experts.

- **Staff competence should be developed by focusing on training content, structures and funding**

The capacity of staff to adapt to changes in the workplace and adopt new operational models should be improved with the help of training and mentoring. Training should emphasize child-centred pedagogics and, in particular, early childhood education for both children of preschool age and children in need of special support. Other key areas for development include multicultural early childhood education, parental participation and the role of early childhood education in supporting the family, multidisciplinary cooperation in early childhood education, and leadership, evaluation of operations and quality management. An additional training challenge involves the application of information technology as a tool of early childhood education.

Basic, supplementary and further training for early childhood education staff should be developed so as to take better account of the practical skills needed on the job. There is a need for closer cooperation between early childhood education staff and training providers. This can help ensure changes in early childhood education practices will be incorporated in training content and the curricula of the various training providers.

23 Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients (812/2000).

Training for child health clinic staff should also take greater account of cooperation between health care and early childhood education and the need to deal with questions relating to the education of children of early childhood education age. Interadministrative cooperation should be increased through joint training for staff in early childhood education, health care and the education authorities.

Early childhood education staff and work communities should be provided with supplementary training and mentoring as needed. Both of these can help maintain and enhance professional competence. They can also boost staff members' ability to cope in an increasingly demanding job.

Training should be developed so as to afford staff the opportunity for training at different stages of their career. The emphasis in supplementary training should be shifted away from individual training days towards training the work community as a whole.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the educational institutions will be responsible for ensuring training content is assessed against the current requirements of early childhood education. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that training responds to municipal demand for specially trained staff.

In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the municipalities will be responsible for ensuring that effective structures are put in place for supplementary training and mentoring for early childhood education staff, and that the necessary financing is secured.

The principle of constant improvement in early childhood education

There has been a lot of research in the area of early childhood education, but it has been scattered and uncoordinated. Clearer coordination of research would further knowledge acquisition in the field and benefit the communication and application of new knowledge. There is a need for training and research institutes to cooperate with each other and with staff working in the field.

The centres of excellence on social welfare²⁴ represent an important initiative for building cooperation. Their cooperating partners are the municipalities and joint municipal boards, the universities, polytechnics and other training and research institutes in the field, the regional councils, the provincial State offices and organizations in the social welfare field. The key national cooperating partner is the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES). The network of centres of excellence on social welfare, which covers the whole of Finland, comprises eight regional centres and one Swedish-speaking centre serving the whole country. Through their work, the centres will create regional structures of cooperation to foster basic and specialized skills in the field of social welfare and to secure services and expert services requiring special skills and regional cooperation in the social welfare field.

24 Act (1230/2001) and Decree (1411/2001) on the operations of centres of excellence on social welfare

The methods for assessing the quality of early childhood education require further development. Quality work is a continuous process in which client-orientation, the professional competence of staff, a well-functioning work community and management commitment are key elements. Development and assessment of quality in early childhood education should place special emphasis on feedback from children and parents. Staff awareness of quality thinking and evaluation should be increased with the aid of training.

Information and communication technology permits the development of new ways of working and the creation of a service network encompassing both early childhood education staff, other experts and parents. Such a network can help improve the flow of information on early childhood education both on individual issues and at the level of the system as a whole, and can also facilitate a new type of interaction in which parents, too, can participate on an equal footing. Both the staff working in early childhood education and families must be provided with a range of opportunities and resources to benefit from information and communication technology. Staff should also be given the necessary training and equipment.

There is a need for a forum of experts to promote cooperation and reconcile the views of the different actors involved in early childhood education. Such a forum would be of use in the long-term development, visioning and planning of early childhood education and would make proposals for essential research and development projects. The members of the forum would represent expertise from the fields of public administration, research, training, NGOs and the field of practical early education work.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will appoint a forum of experts.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will be responsible for ensuring the centres of excellence on social welfare take adequate account of the need to develop early childhood education to an equal degree as other areas of social welfare.

The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) will develop regular monitoring and evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education and study the potential of information and communication technology applications in early childhood education.

- **The municipalities should incorporate early childhood education into their programmes on children and families**

Strategic work by the municipalities for developing their policies on children and families can generate an overview on municipal action to secure children's healthy development, growth and learning, essential early childhood education services, their operating principles and other forms of service and support, while also clarifying the respective roles and forms of cooperation between the different administrative bodies and actors at municipal level.

New approaches are needed in the cooperation between the social welfare and health care authorities and the education authorities. The child health clinics and

daycare services between them come into contact with most families with children. Cooperation between the child health clinics and early childhood education services requires further intensification and development. The benefits of closer cooperation include the ability to arrange special support at an early stage for those children who need it. The challenges for cooperation between the social welfare and education authorities include the provision of comprehensive morning and afternoon activities for young schoolchildren, the prevention and treatment of learning difficulties, and the provision of support for the mother tongues of children from cultural minorities and for Finnish and Swedish. The continuity of early childhood education, preschool education and basic education in the schools can be secured by close cooperation between early childhood education services and the schools. All these will make it possible to work together to foster and support parenthood.

Early childhood education services can be highly effective in preventing the marginalization of at-risk children. Local differences within the municipalities should be taken into account in arranging municipal services and allocating resources.

Municipal early childhood education services should also develop ways of working that will allow the further development of families' own social networks. These arise naturally through joint activities and interaction involving children and parents. Developing the content and quality of early childhood education services and increasing cooperation between municipal services for children and families can also help foster the development of a sense of community and shared responsibility within the municipality.

Development of early childhood education services will require networking both between different administrative bodies within individual municipalities and between the municipalities themselves. Cooperation between municipalities will allow individual municipalities to meet early childhood education service needs for which they do not have sufficient resources of their own. Networking between the various experts involved in early childhood education will also often prove necessary, for example in dealing with specific issues relating to content.

The municipalities will draw up their own policies on early childhood education, for example as part of their programmes on children and families.

- **Implementation and monitoring of the national policy definition on early childhood education**

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will be responsible for implementation of the national policy definition on early childhood education and monitoring the results of implementation. In pursuing implementation, the Ministry will cooperate with, among others, the Ministry of Education, the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES), the National Board of Education, the provincial State offices, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the individual municipalities, educational and research institutes and organizations active in the field of early childhood education.

Appendix I

Proposed actions in brief

- *The legislation on children's daycare will be reformed.*
- *The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) will draw up a national plan for early childhood education in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities and other experts.*
- *The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the educational institutions will be responsible for ensuring training content is assessed against the current requirements of early childhood education. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that training responds to municipal demand for specially trained staff.*
- *In addition, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the municipalities will be responsible for ensuring that effective structures are put in place for supplementary training and mentoring for early childhood education staff, and that the necessary financing is secured.*
- *The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will appoint a forum of experts on early childhood education.*
- *The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will be responsible for ensuring the centres of excellence on social welfare take adequate account of the need to develop early childhood education to an equal degree as other areas of social welfare.*
- *STAKES will develop regular monitoring and evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education and study the potential of information and communication technology applications in early childhood education.*
- *The municipalities will draw up their own policies on early childhood education, for example as part of their programmes on children and families.*

Appendix 2

Statistical data on children's daycare and preschool education

Table 1. Children in municipal daycare on January 31, 2001

	Daycare centre	Family daycare	Group family daycare	Total	Percentage of age group
Full-daycare					
Under-3s	16 327	17 187	3 130	36 644	21.4
3-5 year-olds	65 480	29 211	7 817	102 508	55.9
6-year-olds in full-daycare*	1 618	1 568	379	3 565	5.5
TOTAL	83 425	47 966	11 326	142 717	34.0
Part-daycare					
Under-3s	642	959	267	1 868	1.1
3-5 year-olds	9 007	2 397	967	12 371	6.7
6-year-olds in part-daycare*	755	266	78	1 099	1.7
6-year-olds in part-daycare**	32 405	2 323	1 224	35 952	55.1
Schoolchildren	3 535	1 796	775	6 106	
TOTAL	46 344	7 741	3 311	57 396	
0-6-year-olds in daycare	126 234	53 911	13 862	194 007	46.2
<i>Percentage of 0-6-year-olds in daycare in the different forms of daycare</i>	<i>65.1</i>	<i>27.8</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>100.0</i>	
ALL CHILDREN IN DAYCARE	129 769	55 707	14 637	200 113	

*Do not participate in preschool education

**Need daycare as well as preschool education

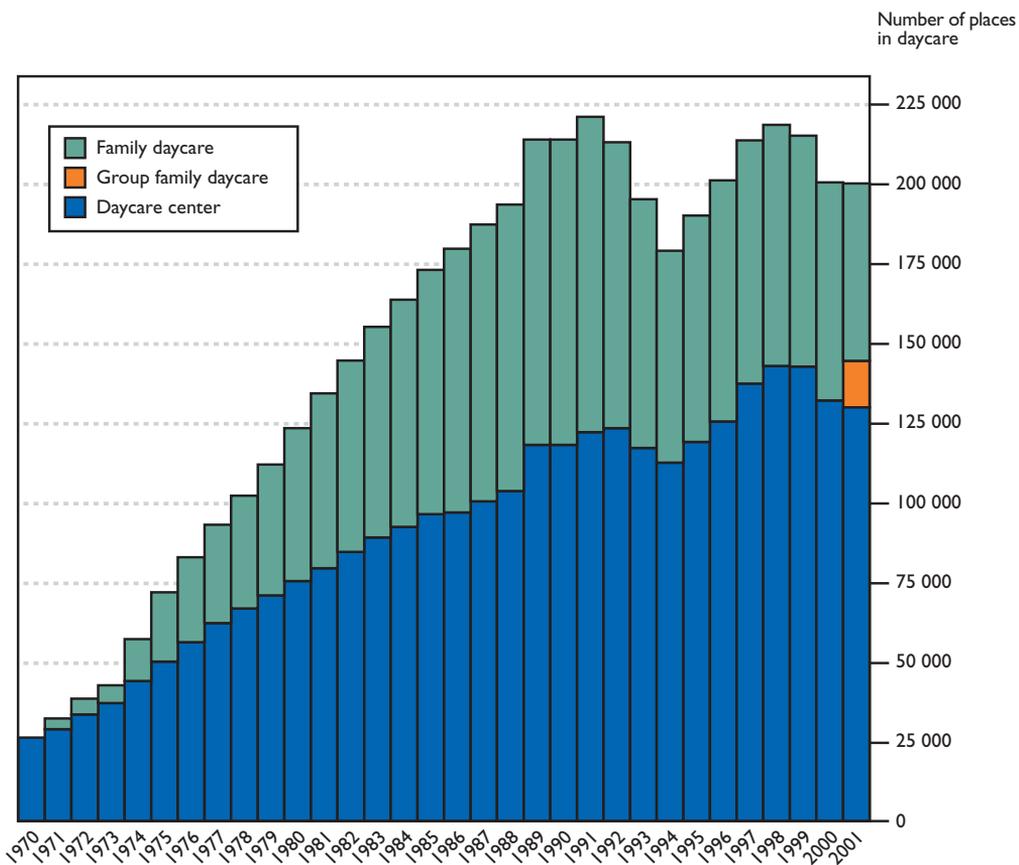


Figure 1. Places in daycare 1970—2001

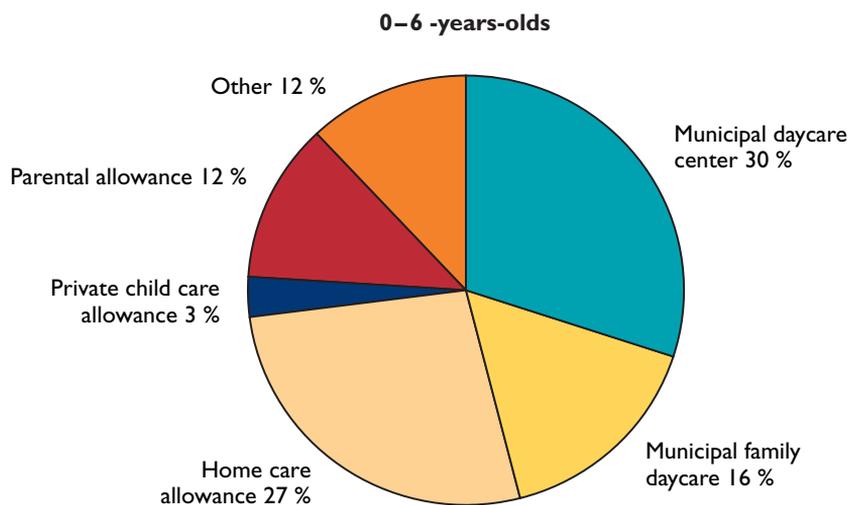


Figure 2. Care arrangements for small children on December 31, 2000

Table 2. Children receiving special support as a percentage of all children in daycare, January 31, 2001

	<i>Children in daycare</i>	<i>Children receiving special support</i>	<i>%</i>
0-6-year-olds	194 007	11 218	5.8
Schoolchildren	6 106	970	15.9
Total	200 113	12 188	6.1

Table 3. Children in evening, night and weekend care as a percentage of all children in daycare, January 31, 2001

	<i>Children in daycare</i>	<i>Children in evening, night or weekend care</i>	<i>%</i>
0-6-year-olds	194 007	13 065	6.7
Schoolchildren	6 106	655	10.7
Total	200 113	13 720	6.9

Table 4. Number of children in preschool education, August 1, 2000

	<i>6-year-olds</i>	<i>6-year-olds in municipal preschool education</i>	<i>Percentage in municipal preschool education</i>
Province			
Southern Finland	26 444	23 800	90.0 %
Western Finland	22 480	19 555	87.4 %
Eastern Finland	5 641	5 096	90.0 %
Oulu	6 333	5 674	90.0 %
Lapland	2 379	2 272	95.0 %
Whole country	63 277	56 397	89.1 %

Table 5. Number of small schoolchildren in daycare 1990—2001

<i>Year</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Number	17 390	16 830	10 130	10 100	9 000	6 960	6 106