

Stockholm Conference Report

Policy challenges for early childhood education and care provision across OECD countries

Improving the quality of, and access to early childhood education and care has become a major policy priority in OECD Member countries, according to a new OECD publication, **Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care**, launched at an international conference in Stockholm, June 13th-15th, 2001. Taking a broader and more holistic approach than previous studies, *Starting Strong*, a comparative analysis of major policy developments and issues in 12 OECD countries – Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States – highlights innovative approaches in the early childhood field, and proposes policy options that can be adapted to different national contexts. The conference to launch the publication was co-organised by the OECD, the Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden and the Swedish National Agency for Education. On the day before the conference, delegates had a first-hand look at the internationally-renowned Swedish early childhood settings during a pre-conference programme hosted by the City of Stockholm.

Swedish Minister for Schools and Adult Education, Ingegerd Wärnersson, opened the conference, in the presence of John Martin, Director of Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, and of policy officials, researchers and practitioners from ministries and universities across OECD countries. Keynote addresses were given by Professors Sheila Kamerman (Columbia University, New York), Peter Moss (Thomas Coram Institute, University of London) and Sharon Lynn Kagan (Teachers College and Yale University). Over 200 delegates from over 40 countries discussed intensively the findings of the report in six workshops, sharing innovative national and local approaches, and exploring strategies to address the major policy challenges in the early childhood field. Broad press coverage of the event took place in Sweden, with articles in the major national newspapers, and national television and radio interviews of Minister Wärnersson and OECD representatives.

In presenting *Starting Strong*, the OECD underlined that the early years are a first step in lifelong learning, and that early childhood services are increasingly viewed as a key component of national educational, social, and family policy agendas. Countries have adopted diverse strategies to policy development in this field – strategies that are deeply embedded in particular country contexts, values, and beliefs. In particular, early childhood policy and provision are strongly linked to cultural and social beliefs about young children, the roles of families and government, and the purposes of early childhood education and care within and across countries.

What are the most promising strategies for organising policy in ways that promote child and family well-being?

The report proposes eight key elements for equitable access to quality early childhood education and care:

- A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation
- A strong and equal partnership with the education system
- A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support
- Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure
- A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance
- Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision
- Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection
- A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation.

What are the outstanding policy challenges facing OECD countries in the early childhood field?

A major challenge in almost all countries is to ensure sufficient public funding of the sector and adequate co-ordination of the many agencies involved in provision for young children and their families. To establish and maintain a sustainable national system of quality, accessible services, there is a need for substantial government investment. Governments need to develop clear and consistent strategies for efficiently allocating resources, including investment in an infrastructure for long-term planning and quality enhancement efforts. In parallel, as economies and life-patterns grow more complex, clear national ECEC policies are becoming more necessary to cater for the needs of diverse children and families, with co-ordinated policy frameworks at centralised and decentralised levels.

Secondly, the supply of services for children under three years does not meet current demand, and where services do exist, they may be characterised by fragmented access and poor quality of provision. Many countries have responded by expanding this sector, and by introducing protected and paid parental leave policies. Such measures help to promote also gender equity and reconcile family responsibilities and working life.

A third challenge is to improve the recruitment, training and remuneration of early childhood professionals, particularly of staff responsible for the development and education of children under three years. For staff working with pre-school children, there is a growing trend in most countries toward providing them with a tertiary degree. Coherent linking across the different sectors caring for young children is also a priority, in particular, at the levels of sectoral policy-making and local delivery. The improvement of quality through participatory approaches engaging staff, parents and children is also a need.

Recommendations from Stockholm

Conference delegates warmly congratulated the OECD on the scope of the comparative analysis, and expressed the hope that the OECD would continue this work. Given the assistance that OECD reviews have given to moving forward national agendas in the early childhood field, it was proposed that national reviews should be continued, focussing in particular on the concerns of participating countries. In parallel, the OECD should continue to work with national authorities to develop dissemination activities and to update, in consultation with the appropriate ministries, the country profiles in *Starting Strong*, outlining the state of ECEC policy in participating countries. A further initiative that was supported by key speakers and delegates was that the OECD should conduct in-depth, cross-national analyses of major issues that have emerged from the early childhood review. Among the themes mentioned were:

- Toward greater policy co-ordination across the social, family and early childhood sectors;
- Early childhood indicator and data development;
- Funding and financing issues;
- Staffing and training, e.g. managing teacher demand and supply in ECEC settings;
- Effective ECEC programmes for low-income and immigrant families;
- Developing the desire to learn - the characteristics of effective early childhood programmes;
- Family-work balance: parental leave, co-ordinated services and after-school care.

Copies of the publication, **Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care** (213 pages, OECD 2001) are available from Publications, OECD Paris Centre, 2, rue André-Pascal, 75775 Paris Cedex 16, or through the online bookshop <http://electrade.gfi.fr/cgi-bin/OECDBookShop.storefront>

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