

Finland

Population: 5.21 m. **Fertility rate:** 1.7. **GDP per capita:** USD 26 500. **Children under 6 years:** 399 889.

Female labour force participation: 72% of women (15-64 years) are employed, 18.2% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 7.7%).

Labour force participation rate of women with a child(ren) under 6 years: 49.6%, of whom 8% work part-time (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005).

Remunerated maternity and parental leave: 18 weeks of maternity leave plus 26 weeks of parental leave paid at average 66% of earned income (gross). Utilisation almost 100%.

Social expenditure: 27.1% (2003). **Child poverty rate:** 2.8% after taxes and transfers in 2002 (OECD average is 11.2%).

Compulsory school age: 7 years.

Funding of day care services for 0- to 7-year-olds: (including family day care and centre-based care) is 1.1% of GDP. Including the pre-school class (6-7 years), the investment rises to 1.3% of GDP, and when expenditure on the home care allowance is added, the figure reaches 1.7% of GDP. The unit cost per child in day care services is over EUR 8 000 per year.

Average costs to parents: In day care about 15% of costs, and capped at EUR 200 per child per month. Pre-school education is free.

Legal entitlement to a free educational service: Begins at 6 years.

Major service types and duration: Day care centres (*päiväkoti*) open full-day, all-year round; family day care homes/places are also full time, full year. Most children are enrolled full-day. Pre-school classes for children 6-7 years are half-day for the academic year, and are wrapped around by day care.

Rate of access to regulated services: 27.5% of 1- to 2-year-olds; 43.9% of 2- to 3-year-olds; 62.3% of 3- to 4-year-olds; 68.5% of 4- to 5-year-olds; 73% of children 5-6 years; almost full enrolment in the pre-school class for children 6-7 years, about 70% of whom also attend day care.

Designation and professional qualifications of key staff: Children's day care services employ, in addition to heads of centres, kindergarten teachers (the official term), children's nurses, day care assistants, and child minders (family day carers). Kindergarten teachers have completed 3-4 years of study for a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education or in Social Sciences, many of them going on to Master's level.

Child-staff ratios: 1 trained adult for every 4 children under age 3 years; 1 trained adult for every 7 children over 3 years (with additional staff for children with special needs). In family day care, the ratio per day care parent is 4, plus one half day pre-school or school child including day care parents' own (under school age) children. In pre-school education, the maximum ratio is 1 teacher (with an assistant) for 13 children.

Maximum group size: In family day care, the maximum group is 4 full-day children, plus 1 half day child. In child care centres, there are no group size requirements. In pre-school education, the recommended maximum group size is 20 children. If the group exceeds 13, the teacher needs an assistant.

Auspices

In Finland, early childhood policy is intended to support the development and learning of young children and enable them to become ethically responsible members of society. Policy is built on clear understandings by all stakeholders that a creative cohesive society depends on social justice and concern for the rights and responsibilities of all, including children. Respect for mutuality (the possibilities of all different participants and stakeholders to be involved in the development process in an open dialogue) underpins the development of the national ECEC framework launched in 2002, which defines the main principles and guidelines to develop early childhood services across Finland.

Government responsibility for ECEC from 0-6 years rests primarily with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The ministry is responsible for the *National Policy Definition Concerning ECEC*, allowances to parents and service providers, maternity grant, health care, child and family counselling, child welfare and home help services. The National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) has guided the formulation of the *National Curriculum Guidelines in ECEC* for children 0-6 years of age. The Ministry of Education has responsibility for pre-school education for 6-year-olds and morning and afternoon activities for school children. The National Board of Education has responsibility for the curricular orientation of pre-school education. The Ministry of Labour is responsible for parental and care leave.

Municipalities are fully responsible for the implementation and steering of the services in their own localities. In turn, Provincial State Offices monitor the activities of municipalities and provide an annual evaluation of social welfare services. The subjective right of each child to day care, following the parental leave period and until entry to primary school at age 7, is a powerful catalyst underpinning legislative and policy developments. This unconditional right to day care includes the right of parents to choose a home-care allowance instead of municipal day care for their child until the youngest child in the family turns 3.

Context

Labour force rates: In 2004, 72% of women participated in the Finnish labour force, down from 73.4% in 1990. 18.2% of this number are in part-time employment, compared to 7.7% of men in part-time work. (OECD, *Employment Outlook*, 2005). The percentage of women with at least one child below 6 years who participate is 49.6%, and their share in part-time employment is 8% (OECD, *Society at a Glance*, 2005). The percentage of women with a child below 3 years who participate in full-time employment is 42.7%, of whom 8.5% work part time. The relatively low participation rate may be a result of the 3-year child care leave that may be taken by a parent after the birth of a child (see below).

Parental leave and home care leave: Finland offers universal 18 weeks maternity leave, plus 26 weeks paid parental leave. The level of payment is determined according to income earned, being approximately 66% of an employee's pay, and includes a minimum set rate of EUR 15.20/day for 6 days per week (2004). Further, paternity leave of 3 weeks maximum is also granted, which can be taken by fathers during maternity and/or parental leave time. If the father also takes at least two weeks of parental leave he gets two extra weeks of paternity leave, which he can have after the parental leave period. For parents opting not to enrol their children in municipal day care, child care leave can be taken full time or part time until the youngest child turns 3, during which time a flat-rate benefit is paid to the

parent at home. A partial child care leave can also be taken for children from birth to second grade in primary school, but with an allowance only when the youngest child is under 3 or in the first or second grades in primary school.

Access and provision

Every child in Finland under compulsory school age has a subjective right to day care, to be provided by the local authority once parental leave comes to an end. Family and centre-based day care offer full day, full year service, including round the clock care if needed. The Reform concerning morning and afternoon activities for school children entered into force on 1 August 2004. This out-of-school provision is targeted for children on the first and second grades in primary school, and for children in special education from grades 3 to 9. As the provision of out-of-school services is not an obligation, the State provides substantial subsidies to municipalities that offer a minimum of 570 hours annually per child. These services include a variety of municipally provided services, extended by services provided by the Lutheran Church and other voluntary organisations.

Operational features: The municipalities have the obligation to organise day care for all young children whose parents choose to have it. Provision, operating hours and the annual duration of services vary according to service type. Municipalities can opt for a mixed system of provision, combining public and private provision. In general, municipalities provide services directly through municipal day care centres (*päiväkoti*), family day care homes/places and the pre-school class (the main forms of provision). There are two types of private services in municipalities: the fully private services (7% of total) that parents can choose for their child, while accessing a private child care allowance; and secondly, services outsourced by the municipalities to selected private providers. These outsourced services are considered as part of the municipal network, and are partly administered by the municipality, *e.g.* in managing the delivery of places and in supervising quality. In addition, municipalities and voluntary organisations organise various open part-time or sessional ECEC services.

Access patterns

0-1 years: Almost all children are cared for by parents.

1-3 years: 27.5% of children 1-2 years, and 43.9% of 2- to 3-year-olds are in ECEC services, of which 54% in family day care and 46% in day care centres. Services are open 10-12 hours daily, and almost all children take full-time places.

3-6 years: 62.3% of 3- to 4-year-olds, 68.5% of 4- to 5-year-olds and 73% of 5- to 6-year-olds attend, generally full-day in day care centres or family day care.

6-7 years: Enrolments in pre-school education cover about 96% of children. 70% of these children also attend day care.

Out-of-school provision is accessed by 40.5% of the first grade children and 22.4% of children on the second grade in primary school. About 2 500 children in special education on grades 3-9 also attend these services.

Attention to children with diverse needs: In Finland, special services are not considered a separate system. The subjective right to access applies to all children. Many examples of inclusion can be seen in mainstream services all over Finland.

Children with disabilities: In ECEC services, 7% of children have special needs. 85% of the children who receive special support are in mainstream programmes, the remaining 15% being in special groups, these representing about 1% of children in ECEC.

Children from low-income families: The child poverty rate in Finland is 2.8% after taxes and transfers, the second lowest in the world (UNICEF, 2005).

Ethnic and bilingual children: Apart from the Swedish-speaking population (5.6%), there are 2.4% of children using Finnish as a second language. There are over 100 different immigrant groups, the largest of which come from Russia and Somalia. The municipalities in which there is some small concentration of immigrants, for example, in Helsinki and the surrounding municipalities, make policy to support immigrant families and to create experimental programmes for them. Also attention and investment are devoted to the small Indigenous Sami population in Lapland.

Quality

Licensing and regulatory regimes: Finland adopts a strongly decentralised style of regulation. At the same time, the legislation sets out strong and clear requirements, e.g. for staff qualification and adult-child ratios. These requirements apply to both public and private service providers.

Funding: According to OECD (*Education at a Glance*, 2005), expenditure in Finland on “pre-primary educational institutions” (ISCED 0) as a percentage of GDP for pre-primary is 0.4%, and expenditure per child per annum is USD 3 929. These figures, based on ISCED Level 0 definitions, are very partial. Public expenditure for day care services for children 0-6 years amounts to 1.1% of GDP. When the pre-school class (6-7 years) is included, the total expenditure for ECEC is 1.3% of GDP (family day care, centre-based care and pre-school class). When expenditure on the home care allowance is added, the figure reaches 1.7% of GDP. For parents, affordability is not an issue because of the relatively small parent contribution of about 15% of costs, the rest being subsidised by state and local authority taxes. In addition, parents pay eleven months only per annum, although their child’s place is available during holidays also. No fee is charged for low-income families, while the highest fee cannot be more than EUR 200 per month. Pre-school hours for the 6-year-olds are free.

Staffing: In addition to heads of centres children’s day care services employ kindergarten teachers, children’s nurses, and day care assistants. Of staff working directly with children, about 30% have a tertiary degree (bachelor or master of education or bachelor of social sciences), and the rest an upper secondary level training. This percentage of tertiary trained pedagogues is low compared to Denmark (60%) or Sweden (51%). In the pre-school class, teachers must have at least a tertiary level training. Almost all staff are female and some concern is expressed about recruiting more men in ECEC services. Only 4.6% of teachers and 5.8% of children’s nurses are employed part-time.

Training requirements: Day care centres (*päiväkoti*) are staffed by kindergarten teachers (at least, one-third of staff), trained children’s nurses and day care assistants. Kindergarten teachers complete 3-4 years of study for a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education or Social Sciences, some of them going on to Master’s level. Some heads of centres have further training. The other main staff in day care centres are trained children’s nurses who have a secondary vocational training of 3 years in practical nursing. Day care assistants have also appropriate training. Present policy seeks to maintain multi-professional, team-working in centres, with staff carrying out different professional tasks and roles.

Child minders must also have appropriate training but, in practice, variations in the length and content of their training occur. In 2000, the National Board of Education presented a recommendation for a new competence based qualification for child minders (Further Qualification for Child Minders, 2000). Training requirements are rigorous (perhaps the most demanding across the OECD countries), but in practice, the length of the training may vary according to the competence and work experience of the child minder. The schools offering the training and responsible for competence tests must make an individualised learning plan for each student.

Work conditions: The recruitment of new child minders in family day care and a shortage of special educators in ECEC are current challenges. Several initiatives are in place concerning training, steering and wages for family day carers, focused on local and regional networking and the development of new training models, targeting early special education in particular. For 73% of kindergarten teachers, the bachelor degree is only an intermediate phase to a master's degree. However, many of these students move to work in other fields where better income and career opportunities exist, along with better working conditions and less stressful work. The statutory weekly hours worked by trained staff are 38.15, both for kindergarten teachers and children's nurses. There is no statutory requirement for a minimum level of staff development, although an initiative specifying 3-10 days per year for all social welfare staff (including ECEC) took effect on 1 August 2005. From that time, the municipalities will have a statutory obligation to provide sufficient staff development for all social welfare staff (including ECEC).

Child-staff ratios: Child-staff ratios are low in Finland. In centre-based care, there should be at least 1 trained adult for every 4 children under age 3 years, and 1 children's nurse or kindergarten teacher for every 7 children over 3 years. In family day care, the ratio is 4 full-day children and one part-time pre-school or school child per child minder. In part-day services for children 3-6, the ratio is 13 children per one children's nurse or kindergarten teacher. In the pre-school class (6-7 years), there is a recommendation for group size, but no requirement for the child-staff ratio. This means that when the pre-school class takes place in a day care centre, the ratio goes according to the day care regulations (part day 1 to 13, full day 1 to 7). When the pre-school is in a school, the ratio can be as high as 13 children to one teacher, but in excess of 13, the teacher must have an assistant.

Curriculum and pedagogy: The *Core Curriculum for Pre-school Education* (2000) initiative began a holistic process of curriculum reform in Finland. Since August 2000 local curricula for pre-school education for 6-year-olds have been drafted in each municipality (day care centres and schools) in consultation with providers, including private providers from which local authorities have purchased pre-school services. The *National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC* was published in September 2003. The guidelines serve as a basis for the design of the municipal (local) curricula for children from 0 to 6. The core curriculum stresses the importance of care, upbringing and education as an integrated whole for young children. Beyond this focus, no requirement about specific pedagogies is imposed. The new guidelines stress the importance of ECEC in the educational continuum as part of lifelong learning. The ECEC curriculum is part of a comprehensive, integrated whole that ensures consistency and continuity in children's development. The evaluation of the effects of the core curricula for pre-school education is now in process. STAKES provides training for the municipal curricula process organisers, who in turn, lead the training in the municipalities. The centre has also provided an internet-based network to support the organisers during the different phases of implementation (www.stakes.fi/varttua)

Monitoring, evaluation and research: The government Resolution Concerning National ECEC Policy proposes an action programme for the development of ECEC, including the *Project on Quality and Steering in ECEC (2000-2005)* aimed at strengthening the local, regional and national systems of steering and assessment. Research on quality continues to expand, with clear cohesive links between several universities, the Ministry and STAKES. A tool to support ECEC staff across Finland is a comprehensive database (www.stakes.fi/varttua) containing the latest ECEC information on development projects and studies being conducted. This portal has a central role in the implementation of the new curriculum guidelines. Since 2002, information systems work has been guided by the Social Welfare and Health Care Data and Information Reform strategy. This strategy is designed to prepare a national social welfare and health care data information system comprising statistics, corporate data and information on regularly repeated studies and separate surveys. How ECEC planning, monitoring and evaluation activities are enhanced in the age of technology is a question for the future.

Parent and community involvement: Parents have a crucial role in ensuring the responsiveness of services to child interests and needs. Finland's *Government Resolution concerning the National ECEC Policy Definition* strongly raises the issue of parent involvement. National projects such as the *Educational Partnership (2003-05)* and *Early Support (2004-05)* seek to respond to parental needs, the former through staff training that enhances capacity to support parents and parenthood, the latter developing the role of parents in early intervention. In day care centres, it is customary to draw up an individual ECEC plan for each child in collaboration with parents. The implementation of the plan is assessed annually. This is a statutory obligation based on the *Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients (2000)*.

Developments

ECEC in Finland is a well-developed and stable system much appreciated by parents. Universal access to day care services has been a subjective right of each child under 3 since 1990 and of all pre-school children since 1996. Public investment is assured and quality regulations are clear and strictly enforced. The system is characterised by sensitivity to the rights of the child and an avowed concern for equality and fairness. Even for low-income families, fees are not a barrier either to access or to the labour market participation by parents. Day care fees are income-related, the variation being from EUR 18 to EUR 200 (USD 246) per month per child, depending on income level.

Parents have the freedom to use a private or public service. Competition from the excellent public services induces private providers to supply services at reasonable cost. Parents contribute 15.4% of the child care expenditure within public facilities (90% of the sector). With the private child care allowance and municipal supplements, the fees parents pay in private services do not significantly exceed fees in public facilities. Social welfare reform projects are a significant current state initiative with municipalities and regions having access to substantial funds (EUR 82 million/USD 101 245 400).

Mention has been made of the new *National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (2003)* developed by STAKES that guide the organisation and content of ECEC programmes for children 0-6. This curriculum was preceded by a similar initiative by the National Board of Education in formulating the *Core Curriculum for Pre-School Education*.

In addition, ECEC in Finland is gaining recognition as a teaching and research discipline in the universities and polytechnics. New Centres of Excellence in Social Welfare encourage research and development work, bringing together university researchers and ECEC personnel in common projects. A more recent focus for research and the early childhood field is the broader community and family context of a child's life. Greater outreach to parents is being practised, seeing them as not only clients but as valued pedagogical partners. Lifelong learning and transition from one educational setting to another have also received close attention. STAKES' promotion of learning-in-work has also encouraged activities to increase the competence of ECEC personnel in the application and use of information technologies. An outcome of this work is the creation of a new training and network model that enhances collaboration in and between municipalities.