



The Early Advantage

Finland System at a Glance

Demographics

In 2016, there were 407,741 children aged 0-6 in Finland. The number of children born declined each year for five consecutive years. The large majority of families (86 percent) are Finnish-speaking, but the number of people with foreign backgrounds has been increasing; 7.9 percent of the under-school-age population had foreign backgrounds in 2015, and the proportion is higher in Helsinki.

Support for Children and Families

The state's responsibility to provide and promote education, health, welfare, and security is written into the Finnish Constitution, and citizens are guaranteed the right to income and care. All children in Finland have the universal right to free, public, high-quality health care, which includes prenatal and perinatal services for children, mothers, and families. Pregnant women have the right to 105 paid working days of *maternity leave*. Since early 2013, fathers have been able to take 54 working days of *paternity leave* after their child's birth, 18 of which may be used while the mother is on maternity leave. Following this, either the mother or father can take an additional *parental leave* of 158 working days after the maternity leave period ends. Parents of all children under 17 also receive a monthly tax-free child allowance, and parents who choose to take care of children at home can take unpaid leave and receive a home care allowance of €348 (US\$399) per month for every child under 3.

Enrollment in ECEC

All children between the ages of 0 and 6 have a universal right to subsidized ECEC services, though only the final year, pre-primary, is compulsory for children to attend, under legislation that came into effect in August 2016. That law also, for the first time in national history, ended the principle of children's equal access to ECEC regardless of their family's economic position or engagement in the labor market. Now, children whose parents are not students or working full-time have only a 20-hour per week entitlement to subsidized ECEC, and have no right to subsidized part-time ECEC to supplement half-day pre-primary education. Pre-primary education is free for all children aged 6, followed by primary education beginning the year they turn 7. Children are more likely to participate in ECEC as they grow older, with rates rising from 0.8 percent for those under the age of 1 to 29 percent for 1-year-olds, 52 percent for 2-year-olds, 59 percent for 3-year-olds, and 75 percent for 4- to 6-year-olds (as of 2015; 6-year-olds' participation is now compulsory).

Service Providers

The most common form of ECEC service for children under primary school age is center-based ECEC, which is most often offered by municipalities and municipality-outsourced ECEC providers. However, center-based ECEC is also increasingly available from private providers, who are primarily for-profit. Another publicly available service is family-based ECEC, which is offered to children aged 0-6 in small groups in a home-like environment. Such in-home care is typically organized at the ECEC caregiver's home or at the child's home, and may be offered by municipalities, municipality-outsourced ECEC providers, or private ECEC providers.

Governance

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Social Affairs and Health are responsible for services for young children and their families—the former is responsible for ECEC, whereas the latter is responsible for services that deal with children's health and welfare. In 2016, the National Agency for Education (EDUFI), which operates as the implementation arm of the Ministry of Education and Culture, became responsible for drawing up the national core curricula for early childhood education. That change helped in the transition between early-childhood and formal schooling, since the EDUFI had already been responsible for the core curriculum for pre-primary, and basic education, and general and vocational upper secondary education. The municipalities are responsible for organizing ECEC, pre-primary, and basic education at a local level, and are partly responsible for financing it as well.

Finance

The share of GDP dedicated to ECEC services in Finland is higher than the OECD average (1.3 percent compared to 0.8 percent), and most spending on ECEC comes from public funding. Generally, ECEC services for children aged 0-6 are funded jointly by the state (i.e., the central government), municipality, and parents. The state enforces a maximum fee, which, at present, is about €295 (US\$327) per month for full-day provision. Parents' fees are typically means-tested depending on the size and income of the family, although some municipalities charge less than the maximum or nothing at all. In the private sector, ECEC fees are set by providers, and are typically higher. Families who choose to place their children in private ECEC are eligible for a private day care allowance and income-adjusted care supplement,

Regulation of ECEC

All ECEC service providers, both public and private, must meet national legal requirements for the provision of ECEC. These include quality measures, such as the mandatory use of national core curriculum, adult-child ratios, professional qualifications, and staffing patterns and structures, which are regulated by law and pertain to all center-based services. However, the responsibility of monitoring ECEC program quality rests with municipalities and Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVIs). Because monitoring takes place at the local level, there are no shared criteria for program quality in ECEC in Finland.

Teacher Quality

Across the board, minimum requirements for ECEC staff are relatively high in Finland compared to the OECD average. At least one-third of staff working with children aged 0 to 6 in center-based ECEC must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (i.e., be ECEC teachers), while the rest of the workforce is required to have at least upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level education in health and welfare. Though there are not specific legal requirements for the qualifications of center directors, they are mostly ECEC teachers or health or welfare professionals with extensive work experience in the field. The teaching profession, including ECEC teaching, is highly valued in Finland, and teacher education programs offered by universities are highly competitive. The average statutory salaries of ECEC teachers in Finland are below the OECD average. However, given Finland's broad social supports for its citizenry, ECEC teaching is still considered to be an attractive occupation.