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10. subsidy

### Glossary terms

1. **Subjective entitlement:** Children in Finland have had a legal entitlement to full-time ECE since 1996, regardless of the employment status of the parents. However, in 2016-2020 municipalities had an opportunity to restrict the entitlement to 20 hours per week if child's parents did not participate in labor force or study full-time. Entitlement to full-time ECE for all children was returned at the beginning of August 2020.
2. **Municipality:** Municipalities are the local-level actors in the Finnish ECE system. Municipalities have local self-government as well as the right to levy taxes. Municipalities are responsible for the ECE service provision. The Finnish government pays central government transfers to the municipalities in order to cover proportion of the expenses.
3. **HCA (Home care allowance):** Parents of under three-year-old children are entitled to receive cash-for-care benefits for taking care of their child at home after parental leave ends. The benefit is called home care allowance (HCA), and it is paid also from other under school-aged siblings in home care. HCA consists of nationally paid allowance and possible municipal-level supplement that some municipalities offer on top of the national benefit. Municipalities can decide themselves the amount and the eligibility criteria of the municipal supplement for HCA. For example, it can be required that none of the children in the family can be enrolled to ECE.
4. **Private day care allowance:** Private day care allowance is monetary childcare benefit for the families. Parents can claim it to cover some of the expenses of purchasing ECE services directly

on the market. Private day care allowance can be also used in hiring a caregiver for a child at home. Like home care allowance, private day care allowance consists of nationally paid allowance and possible municipal-level supplement that some municipalities offer on top of the national benefit.

### Text of the article

#### 1. AVAILABILITY

Early childhood education (ISCED 0) in Finland consists of early childhood education and care for 0–5-year-olds and pre-primary education for six-year-old children. Children have a **subjective entitlement** to a full-time early childhood education (ECE) place either in center-based ECE or in family day care. (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Pre-primary education is given 20 hours per week for one year before entering primary education, and it has been obligatory since 2015 (Basic Education Act 628/1998).

**Municipalities** are responsible for providing ECE services and have a wide autonomy to decide how the services are locally organized (Vlasov et al., 2019). Municipalities are also the main providers of ECE services in Finland, even though the proportion of private ECE providers, especially the proportion of ECE provided by for-profit providers, has been increasing. However, most children attending ECE are enrolled in publicly provided services (Siippainen et al., 2020.) Center-based ECE is the most common form of provision (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2019), but there is significant variation in the proportions of center-based ECE and family day care provision between the municipalities (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020a). Pre-primary education is given in center-based settings, and in some municipalities, can be organized together with primary education.

As an alternative for enrolling their child to ECE, parents can receive state-funded cash-for-care benefits (home care allowance, **HCA**) for caring for their children at home until the youngest child in home care turns three years (Child Home Care and Private Day Care Allowance Act 1128/1996). Home care allowance (HCA) is widely used in Finland. Almost all families utilize it for some period after the parental leave ends (Haataja & Juutilainen, 2014). HCA has been considered one of the main reasons for lower-than-average enrolment rate to ECE in Finland, since receiving HCA for a child and enrolling the child to ECE are mutually exclusive (see Repo, 2010). Some municipalities offer open ECE services, such as playgroup activities for children in home care. However, open ECE services are not considered as part of statutory ECE services in Finland.

## 2. AFFORDABILITY

ECE service fees for publicly provided ECE are regulated by law and are heavily subsidized by the government. The fees are based on household income, family size and whether the child attends ECE full-time or part-time. In addition, families are entitled to a discount if they have more than one child attending ECE services. There is no service fee for low-income families. (Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care 1503/2016.) From 2018, the government has also provided government grant that municipalities can apply to provide free-of-charge part-time ECE for five-year-olds (Siippainen et al., 2020). Pre-primary education is free-of-charge for all children (Basic education act 628/1998).

ECE service fee regulations do not cover private ECE services. They can decide their fees independently. However, some municipalities regulate the fees of private providers via voucher contracts: A municipality may list a provider among the ECE setting in which families can use a service voucher if their fee is the same or very close to the fees collected in public ECE (Act on Service Vouchers in Social Welfare and Health 569/2009; see also Ruutiainen et al., 2020).

Alternatively, parents can claim **private day care allowance** to reduce the costs of privately provided day care purchased directly on the market.

Enrolling their child to ECE might have some hidden costs for those families who are at the same time taking care of the under three-year-old sibling at home with HCA. In that case, the family would lose the additional amount of HCA for the siblings now enrolled to ECE, in addition to the possible service fees charged from the ECE attendance. The loss of the subsidies would be even higher if the municipality paid additional supplement for HCA. In some municipalities, the family would lose the whole municipal supplement if any of the children in the family were enrolled to ECE services. (Siippainen et al., 2020.)

## 3. AGE OF ENTRY/EXIT

In Finland, paid parental leave ends when the child is approximately nine months old. After this, municipalities are obligated to provide an ECE place for all children whose parents wish to enroll their child to ECE. Child's subjective entitlement to an ECE place ends at the beginning of primary education, typically at the age of seven. (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 2018/540.)

In addition to the entitlement to ECE, children at the age of six are entitled to receive pre-primary

education twenty hours per week, for a year before entering primary school. (Basic Education Act 628/1998). In 2021–2024, the government implements an experiment of expanding pre-primary education to two years, covering also the five-year-olds (Act on the experiment of two-year pre-primary education 1046/2020).

### 4. QUALITY

National, regional and local authorities have all different roles in governing the quality of ECE. On the national level, ECE is steered through legislation, normative national curriculum guidelines as well as steering through information, expert knowledge and research evidence. One of the main purposes of national-level steering is to ensure equal and high quality ECE all over the country. Staff qualifications and adult-child ratios are nationally regulated and obligate both public and private providers. However, the requirements concerning for example staff training and learning environments differ between center-based ECE and family day care. (Vlasov et al., 2019.)

The quality management on the local level is primarily based on self-evaluation. This includes both the quality of the ECE system as well as pedagogical activities. Regional State Administrative Agencies are in charge of monitoring how national regulation is implemented at local level. Together with the Regional State Administrative Agencies the municipalities monitor private ECE providers. Municipalities have also responsibility to assess the quality of their own provision. (Vlasov et al., 2019; see also Regional State Administrative Agencies, 2019.) Even though the quality of ECE pedagogy is high in general, it varies among ECE centers and family day care places (Repo et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible that not all children have access to good quality early childhood education even though they are enrolled in ECE centre or family day care.

### 5. KEY CHALLENGES

Even though children in Finland have had a legal entitlement to ECE since 1996, the enrolment rates to ECE are significantly lower compared to the other Nordic countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). In 2019, 77 percent of 1–6-year-old children were enrolled in ECE services in Finland. The enrolment rates vary also regionally (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020b).

Recent policy initiatives on the national level have strongly aimed at increasing the enrolment rate in ECE. However, barriers of access seem to vary locally. For example, there is a geographical variation in the available forms of the provision. In larger cities, center-based ECE has become the primary form of service, whereas in small municipalities the proportion of family day care is much higher (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020a). Structural quality, for example qualification requirements, varies between different forms of services. In addition, in rural areas the distances to the services are long. Since transportation costs can play a significant role in low-income families, it is crucial that high quality services are located where low-income families live (see Vandebroek et al., 2008).

Cultural construction concerning good parenting and the benefits of ECE vary locally. Parents' and officials' beliefs concerning ECE can form a barrier to access. For example, the popularity of home care is higher in rural area compared to large cities (Karila et al., 2017). This can influence both local policies and families' solutions. In 2016–2020 municipalities had an opportunity to restrict the right to 20 hours per week if the child's parents did not participate in labor force or full-time study. This reflected historically strong emphasis of the main role of ECE as supporting labor force participation and the ideals of the importance of caring for children primarily at home (Paananen et al., 2019). However, the change was not implemented throughout the country. This reflects the variance in the ways in which the role of ECE is constructed locally (Karila et al., 2017).

In addition, this variation can be seen in the local policies concerning municipality supplements related to home care allowances. Some municipalities top up home care allowance with municipality supplement. HCA forms an incentive especially for families with unstable position in the labor market to care for their child at home (Kosonen & Huttunen, 2018). This resonates with the fact that families' socioeconomic status is connected with child's enrolment in ECE (Siippainen et al., 2019; 2020).

The growing proportion of private ECE providers might cause a challenge to access for certain groups of children. For example, private providers cater less for those children with diverse needs (Vainikainen et al., 2018). The proportion of private provision varies locally (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2020b). All in all, national policy initiatives do not seem to be sufficient in increasing enrolment rate. There is a need for analyzing the local barriers of access.

### **Further reading and online resources**

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