

## **Government, Policy, and the Role of the State in Childhood (Finland)**

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### **Glossary terms**

*Early childhood education and care* “A systematic and goal-oriented whole consisting of education, instruction and care with particular emphasis on pedagogy. In early childhood education and care the primary focus should be on the child's best interest” (Early Childhood Education Act 2018). “Institutional early childhood education and care is organised by municipalities, joint municipal authorities and other service providers, and it may be offered at a day-care centre, in family day-care or as open early childhood education and care” ([Vlasov et al. 2019](#): 18).

*Mannerheim League for Child Welfare* Finland's largest child welfare organization. The Mannerheim League is a non-governmental organization and membership is open to everyone. It promotes the well-being of children and of families and increases respect for childhood. The goal is also to take care that children's views are visible in public decision-making. For more information, see Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (n.d.).

*Save the Children* The world's leading independent organization for children. Save the Children Finland was founded in 1922 and it is a politically and religiously independent non-governmental organization. The organization fights to improve the lives of children permanently and immediately in Finland and all over the world. For more information, see Save the Children (n.d.).

*The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters* A nationwide child welfare organization that prevents domestic violence and helps families and children in insecure and difficult situations. The federation has thirty member associations. For more information, see the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters (n.d.).

*The Central Union for Child Welfare* A central organization that promotes children's well-being and ensures that children's rights are fully implemented. The union was founded in 1937. The central union's members include municipalities, joint municipal boards, and non-governmental organizations. For more information, see the Central Union for Child Welfare (n.d.).

## **The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child**

In accordance with Article 43 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Committee on the Rights of the Child is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC. Finland ratified the convention in 1991. Children's participatory rights have been explicitly embedded into several acts in Finnish national legislation ([Koivula et al. 2017](#)), and the rights of the child are generally well implemented in Finland.

At present, the position of Finnish children can be considered good in many ways. Infant mortality ([Korpi 2010](#)) and the physical punishment of children ([Ellonen et al. 2007](#)) have decreased during the last decades. Changes have taken place in the relations between children and adults, and children's participation has increased in matters concerning themselves (see [Enroos et al. forthcoming](#)). However, the participatory rights of children still need improvements. In particular, the most vulnerable children are poorly aware of their rights and the legal remedies available ([Ministry of Justice 2020](#)). The children's views and the best interests of the child are not always considered in the courts or in administrative decision-making (see, e.g., [De Godzinsky 2014](#); [Sormunen 2021](#)). It has also been noted that impact assessment on children's rights is not always considered in national or local public decision-making ([Ruuska et al. 2018](#)).

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, formerly the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) was funded to help children after the Second World War. During reconstruction, UNIFEC played an important role and Finland was one of the first recipients of the aid. Quite soon after the war, Finland started to distribute grants themselves. The Finnish Committee for UNICEF was founded in 1967. The goal is to raise funds for UNICEF development programs and to promote the realization of the rights of the child in Finland ([UNICEF 2021a](#)).

On a global level, UNICEF headquarters maintains a set of global databases on the key indicators for monitoring the situation of women and children ([UNICEF 2021b](#)). On a national and local level, the Child Friendly Municipality (Lapsiystävällinen kunta in Finnish) initiative in Finland has been running since 2012. The goal is to help municipalities to promote the rights of the most vulnerable children in particular ([Child Friendly Cities Initiative 2021](#)).

### **Political institutions and structures**

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has a leading role in formulating Finland's family policy and developing the well-being of children, young people, and families. The ministry is especially responsible for the development of social welfare and health care services and for ensuring an adequate level of income for families ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013](#)). The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for education, ranging from [early childhood education and care](#) (ECEC) to universities, research, culture, and youth work ([Ministry of Education and Culture 2021](#)).

The Finnish Ombudsman for Children monitors the welfare of children and youth, and the implementation of their rights. In Finland, the post of the Ombudsman for Children was established in 2005. The role is to ensure that the rights and status of children are upheld by political decision-makers and legislators. The ombudsman evaluates how children's rights are realized and suggests improvements. The Ombudsman for Children provides information in an annual report and summary, called the Child Barometer, and every second year organizes the

hearings of children ([Finnish Ombudsman for Children 2021](#)). In addition, some large municipalities have their own children's ombudsman.

Supervising children's rights is also an important part of the Parliamentary Ombudsman's work (Parliamentary Ombudsman 2021). The Parliamentary Ombudsman is responsible for ensuring that public authorities obey the law and contribute to good administration; people may submit complaints to the ombudsman. However, it has been noted that the mechanisms for appeals and complaints tend to serve adults better than children. On the other hand, the Parliamentary Ombudsman has included a special route for children to make complaints via the internet ([Julin and Pösö 2020](#)).

There is also an extensive network of non-governmental social welfare and health care organizations that provide services for families and children ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013](#)). *The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, Save the Children, the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, and the Central Union for Child Welfare* are the oldest, but still the most active, non-governmental organizations promoting the best interests of children at the societal level.

### **The quality of institutions and services**

In Finland, public services are heavily produced with tax revenue. The services are jointly accessible to all citizens. Finland presents a mix of welfare production. The social welfare and healthcare system is founded on the public sector. For example, preprimary, primary, and secondary education is free of charge, and even after that, education is, for the most part, free of costs. Customer fees for ECEC are determined by the income of the guardians. In addition, services are available from various private companies. Local authorities are responsible for providing social welfare and healthcare services for families. The basic services that must be available in every municipality are defined by law. The provision of basic social welfare and healthcare services is funded by municipal tax revenue and central government transfers ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013](#)).

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent agency responsible for the evaluation of education. It carries out evaluations from ECEC to higher education. The aim is to develop education and to produce information for local, regional, and national decision-making, as well as to make international comparisons ([FINEEC 2021](#)). Most of the child welfare and protection policies are implemented by the 311 municipalities in Finland. The quality recommendations for child welfare services guide the child welfare work and support organizations involved in monitoring the system ([Malja et al. 2019](#)).

To sum up, the Finnish welfare system is based on the idea of universalism, meaning that all residents are entitled to basic social security benefits and services regardless of their position in the labor market ([Kautto 1999](#)). In turn, universalism is related to the level of trust in welfare state institutions. In Finland there is a high level of trust, especially in universal childcare services ([Muuri 2006](#); [Rothstein and Stolle 2003](#); see also [Social Welfare Act 2014](#)) but also in child protection services ([Julin and Pösö 2020](#)). On average, parents are satisfied with the different areas of ECEC ([Sulkanen et al. 2020](#)). The efficiency of the present monitoring system, especially in the areas of child welfare and outsourced service providers, has been a critical concern. The concern highlights that the licensing of service providers and obligations for oversight over the quality of services do not necessarily guarantee the high quality of services if their quality control is not adequately resourced ([Julin and Pösö 2020](#)).

## Family policies

Finnish family policy has traditionally focused on fertility, poverty, the well-being of children, female labor force participation, and gender equality. Family policy includes services to families, monetary transfers, and legislation. In recent decades, the role of services has been emphasized ([Moisio 2007](#)). The current emphasis of the family policy is on reconciling paid employment and family life, strengthening fatherhood in particular and ensuring an adequate level of income for families. As such, the most important forms of support for families are child benefits and ECEC services. Taking into account the intensified urbanization and climate change, the housing policy and environmental policy also have substantial implications for the daily lives of families with children ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013](#); [Moisio 2007](#)).

Childcare policy has a long history in Finland. All children under school age have a subjective right to ECEC, but their parents decide whether or not their child participates in ECEC. After the parental leave period, when the child is usually nine or ten months old, the parents have several options to choose from. If the parents choose to take care of their child at home, they are entitled to home care leave and allowance until the child turns three years old.

In recent years, ECEC has been the subject of great political interest. The participation rate in ECEC is lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries ([OECD 2018](#)). Legislation and guidance on ECEC have been reformed in many ways and new experiments have been launched. An experiment on providing five year olds with free of charge ECEC was launched by the government for the period 2018–2021. One of the purposes of the experiment was to increase the participation of five year olds and their siblings in ECEC ([Siippainen et al. 2019, 2020](#)). Also, Finland is rolling out a pilot scheme extending preschool teaching to five year olds ([Law on the Experiment of Two-Year Pre-school Education 2020](#)).

Finnish child protection is characterized by a family services orientation in international comparisons ([Gilbert et al. 2011](#)). The Child Welfare Act (2007) puts a lot of emphasis on children's rights in general and on their participation right in particular. Child protection services are to be provided with a low threshold, on a voluntary basis, for service users and from the point of view of the child's best interests. Involuntary measures are only to be implemented as a last resort ([Julin and Pösö 2020](#)). From the perspective of child abuse and neglect, in 2012 and 2015, the mandatory reporting system was expanded so that practitioners working with children and families now have an obligation to notify both the police and the child protection authorities when they suspect sexual or physical child abuse ([Julin and Pösö 2020](#)).

Although the public sector is responsible for providing the majority of services for families, there are also numerous non-governmental, social welfare, and healthcare organizations. These third-sector organizations offer a wide range of services for families that mostly supplement or cooperate with public service provision ([Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013](#); [Möttönen and Niemelä 2005](#)). The non-governmental organizations have a vital role, especially in provision work and creating new working methods ([Oosi et al. 2018](#)).

Finland has a history of having strong family policy, but there are concerns that policies are nowadays more focused on supporting parenthood and building communities than on acknowledging structural issues ([Sihvonen 2020](#)). This is a reasonable point of view since economic polarization among families with children has been increasing since the 1990s ([Tarvinen, Myllyniemi, and Gisler 2020](#)).

### Further reading and online resources

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