

ECEC POLICY IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Early Childhood Education services have become nearly universal for older preschool children in many countries over the last twenty years. Most European countries now regard early childhood education and care as an essential part of preparation of children for public school, an important component of the supports to families with employed parents, and as a venue for identifying children and families who will need special services. There is wide variation in policy toward ECEC for children less than three years of age, but full-day care with a developmental purpose is practically a norm in most of these countries for children of three and over. The OECD report on Early Childhood Education and Care systems summarized the variation across child age levels in this way: "A pattern of coverage is seemingly emerging across the industrialized countries: a coverage rate ranging from 20-30% in year 1-2, and reaching over 80% coverage in full-time places, some time in the fourth year." (OECD, 2001, p. 148)

Australia and the United States maintain policies which are much less supportive of early childhood education and care. The United Kingdom and Canada (Quebec, particularly) have moved strongly to expand ECEC coverage in recent years. Table 1 on the next pages gives a thumbnail sketch of key ECEC policies across a wide variety of countries for which data is available. Further details to supplement Table 1 are provided in Tables 2 through 5 in the Appendix. The notes below provide a brief overview of some of the main lines of ECEC policy in a these countries.

AUSTRALIA

The Commonwealth Government is responsible for day care and the state and territorial governments are responsible for preschool education. This has fostered a traditional separation between care services (seen as employment and family support) and education services (for child development). There are two years of (nearly) universal preschool provided largely in schools, with half days at age four and full school days at age five before compulsory schooling starts at age six.

Over the last decade, the government has dismantled a system of operational subsidies to non-profit community child care centres and replaced them with the Child Care Benefit which goes directly to parents and is scaled to income. Full assistance (\$133 Aus for first child) ends at about \$30,000 (Aus) of family income, so that average assistance is about \$45 Aus per week. Child Care Benefit is only available to families using formal or registered-informal child care services (about 22% of children 1-4 years). There are important quality problems in some centres which Australia has been addressing, through a Quality Improvement and Accreditation System. There is no statutory paid pregnancy or parental leave in Australia.

BELGIUM

Belgium is split into Flemish and French communities and policies and services are determined and administered separately, although they are broadly very similar. In early education, a universal and well-organized system has been in place for decades so that children from 2 ½ to 5 attend preschools usually for the full school day. Extra funds are directed towards low-income and immigrant areas to promote equity and the quality of schooling.

Children less than 3 years may attend child care centres and family child care, with some parents receiving subsidies according to income and all parents eligible for substantial tax benefits related to the cost of care. About 30% of children 1-3 years of age use centre or family home child care services. Paid maternity leave lasts for 15 weeks and paid parental leave for another 3-6 months (full-time or part-time).

CANADA

Jurisdiction for education and for child care services is primarily provincial and territorial, so wide differences in policy exist across jurisdictions. Kindergartens in public schools provide part day preschool education during the school year for five year olds in most provinces/territories. In Quebec and New Brunswick, this kindergarten is full day. In most parts of Ontario, part day public kindergarten is also provided for four-year-olds.

In Quebec, child care services in centres and family homes are heavily subsidized publicly, being available for \$5 per day to children 0-4. In other jurisdictions, there are child care subsidies for some low-income families and child care expenses are deductible from income before taxes are levied, improving horizontal tax equity. Maternity and parental benefits are in federal jurisdiction and cover eligible families for 50 weeks at the time of a birth.

DENMARK

In Denmark, services for children 0-6 years have traditionally been considered an integral part of the social welfare system. The major aim is to support the development of young children, in collaboration with parents, and to provide caring and learning environments for them while their parents are at work. Policy responsibility is with the Ministry of Social Affairs, but local authorities (municipalities) are responsible for many policy and operational matters. The Ministry of Education is responsible for policy covering preschool classes and after school care, but again much responsibility for funding, policy and operations resides on the local level. Frequently, these local authorities have established unified departments bringing together care and education.

Ninety percent of municipalities guarantee child care places will be available for children 0-6 years. Sixty-eight percent of children 1-3 years of age are enrolled in day care facilities, many in family child care. Enrollment across all services

from 3-6 years is 92%. Parents make a contribution to the cost of child care which may not exceed 1/3rd of the cost for the first child and less for successive children. Danish child care services are generally very well run and considerable attention is paid to enhancing the developmental quality of play and educational experiences.

Compulsory school does not start till age 7; nearly all children at age 6 attend preschool classes half-days in schools and organized after-school care. Paid maternity leave covers 28 weeks, paternity leave another 2 weeks, and an additional 26 weeks at lower pay is available by right.

FINLAND

Finland provides an unconditional right to every child to have access to ECEC services from 1-6 years of age. The ECEC system is predominantly public, with some private provision. In general, municipalities provide services directly through municipal day-care centres, family day-care homes or preschool groups.

Free preschool education is available for 6 year olds for about 20 hours per week during the school year (compulsory education begins at 7 years). About 24% of children 1-3 years of age are in ECEC services, and about 66% of children 3-5 years mostly full-time in child care centres but some part-time. Parents pay fees which cover about 10% of the costs, with the rest subsidized by state and local authority taxes, scaled to family income. Parents may alternatively request a private childcare allowance to be paid by the municipality to the childminder or day care centre of their choice (about 120 Euros per month).

There are 18 weeks of paid maternity leave (six before birth), 26 weeks of paid parental leave and 3 weeks of paternity leave. In addition, for those parents opting not to enrol their children in municipal day-care, a flat-rate, three-year child care allowance is available (no job-protected leave) with payment of approximately 250 Euros per month for the first child, and 80 Euros for successive children. Finnish authorities are concerned about the negative effects of these prolonged home care allowances on children and on the position of these mothers in the labour market and in society (OECD, 2001, p. 164)

ITALY

Policy responsibility of ECEC in Italy is split between the Ministry of Education for the “scuola materna” for 3-6 year olds and the regions and municipalities for the “asili nidi” for infants and toddlers. About 70% - 90% of children (depending on the region) attend the “scuola materna” from 3 years of age, becoming practically universal at age 5. Most of these are in schools and are provided free of charge under the Ministry of Education, but a considerable number are confessional and charge modest fees. These facilities operate eight hours per day, September to June.

Most children who are one or two years of age are not using ECEC services. About 6% are in the “asilo nido” . Most of the provision is by municipalities and is centred in urban northern Italy. Fees are often subsidized. However about 27% of children in this age group are cared for at home by parents, another 48% are in out of home informal care, and another 15% by childminders in the home. Child-staff ratios in Italian ECEC facilities are typically fairly high (7:1 in asili nidi, 20:1 or higher in scuola materna).

Paid maternity leave is available for 5 months and another 10 months of parental leave is available at much lower compensation.

NETHERLANDS

The Dutch government is moving toward an integrated framework of services for children from 0-6 years, crossing traditional education, social welfare and preventative youth healthcare lines, and achieving consensus with local authorities about ECEC policy goals. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for children 4-6 years, with compulsory schooling beginning at age 5. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport has responsibility for family support, socio-educational activities and the funding and supervision of out-of-home child care.

Much work has recently been done to tighten up regulatory frameworks, training regimes and quality control. A special focus is given to children-at-risk, including children from immigrant families. Another striking feature of Dutch early childhood policy has been the use of an experimental phase to trial innovative programmes in ECEC. A number of such programmes are now being mainstreamed. Dutch employers have a much bigger direct role in the funding of child care than in most other countries.

Children who are four years of age have a legal right to a place in pre-primary school for 5 hours per day, 40 weeks per year. Attendance is virtually 100%.

Child care provision is private (both for-profit and non-profit) but publicly co-funded. Parents pay, on average, 44% of costs, with government and employer subsidization taking up the balance. Many employers either set up their own child care services, or, more usually, purchase or rent “company places” in child care centres. These places represented about 50% of all child care places for children 0-4 in 1998. There is a marked tendency for middle and high income parents to use services more than low-income families. About 20% of children 0-4 use child care centres. Playgroups are used by about 50% of children 2-4 years of age. These playgroups are established by private and community foundations, and almost all are subsidized by local government but with some parental contribution. Children usually visit the playgroups twice a week for 2-3 hours to play with peers or participate in an intervention programme. Expenditures on child care are tax deductible from income.

Paid maternity leave is available for 16 weeks (4-6 weeks before birth) and unpaid but job-protected partial leave (employed at least 50% of normal hours) is available for 6 months after that.

NORWAY

In Norway, an integrated system of services for children from 0-6, with an extensive system of public child care centres (*barnehager*) has existed for many years. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is responsible for ECEC. Much responsibility has been devolved to county and municipal governments, which generally have unified early childhood services and schools under one administrative department. The county administers government grants to child care centres, family day care, and drop-in centres and supports its municipalities on ECEC policy issues. There is a national regulatory framework for child care centres, and national guidelines concerning values and objectives, curricular aims, and pedagogical approaches.

Most *barnehager* are public (municipal), but a significant number are private. Both receive national government subsidies covering between 30%-40% of costs, and municipal subsidies covering a variable further amount. Parents pay between 28%-45% of costs, depending on income and municipality. The government's objective is to cover 50% of costs from national grants, 30% with municipal grants and leave parents to pay a maximum of 20% (OECD, 2001, p. 171).

Compulsory school begins at age 6. About 80% of children 4-6 are in child care centres and family home arrangements and about 50% of children 1-4 years of age. It is a declared political priority to achieve universal access for all children under 6 years of age. In addition to family allowances and lone-parent allowances, all families are able to claim tax deductions of child care expenses. There is also a cash benefit scheme that provides a cash grant (approx. \$400) to a parent who looks after a child at home, or who uses ECEC that does not receive government grants (an informal childminder). The parents most likely to use this cash benefit and stay at home with their children are lone mothers, mothers with several children, and mothers in low-income one-earner families (OECD, 2001, p. 173)

Portugal

Since the mid 1990's, Portugal has extensively reformed the ECEC sector. The Ministry of Education is responsible for pedagogical quality in all settings and funding of kindergarten education for 3-6 year olds. The Ministry of Labour and Solidarity is responsible for funding and supervision of out-of-home child care for children 3 months and older. A National Framework law provides the definitions, major policy aims, and implementation strategies for pre-school education, with pre-school viewed as the first stage of lifelong learning.

The *Jardims de infancia* (pre-schools or kindergartens) provide pre-school education for 3-6 year olds, free of charge for five hours per day, five days a week. Approximately 60% of 3 year olds, 75% of 4 year olds and 90% of 5 year olds attend, or 73% of the 3-6 age group. Care is available beyond five hours per day but is charged according to the parents' income.

Almost 90% of children up to 3 years of age are cared for by their families or in informal care arrangements. Approximately 12% are in some form of creche or family day care.

Up until a few years ago, early childhood services in Portugal tended to be loosely structured, play-oriented and geared towards care and social aims, according to the preferred aims of the providers. The new curriculum guidelines, improved inspection methods, and enhanced training of staff are increasing the focus on learning. Every pre-school class has a qualified kindergarten teacher with a four-year post-secondary education degree. Creches are staffed either by kindergarten teachers, nurses or social workers, all of whom have tertiary level professional qualifications.

Eighteen weeks of job-protected maternity leave is available, with 100% pay, and an additional six months of unpaid parental leave for each parent is also available.

SWEDEN

Sweden has long been a leader in the provision of early childhood education and care, with strong emphasis both on the quality of ECEC services and the support that ECEC services can provide to equitable gender roles. Responsibility for central policy, for the goals, guidelines and financial framework of ECEC lies solely with the Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, no matter what the age of the preschool child. Distinctions between day care and kindergarten have been removed; all services below age 6 are known as pre-school services, and classes at age 6 are known as pre-school classes (compulsory schooling begins in Sweden at age 7).

Municipalities in Sweden are responsible for the provision of pre-school services, for monitoring the quality of ECEC services, and for funding. There is a National Agency for Education which is responsible for overall evaluation, data collection, and the development and supervision of ECEC service delivery at central and regional levels.

By law, every child who has reached one year of age has a right to ECEC services (within a reasonable time limit – 3 months) if both parents work or study. If a parent is unemployed or on child-related leave, children have a right to 15 hours per week of care. Approximately 64% of children 1-5 years attend a full-day pre-school and another 11% are in family day care (for a total of 75%). Virtually all children 6 years of age are in pre-school classes, or already in

compulsory schooling. Pre-school is free for children from age 5 up, but fees may be charged for leisure-time centres beyond preschool hours. For younger children, fees are capped on an income-related basis (no more than 3% of income for the first child, an additional 2% for the second child, and an additional 1% for successive children).

98% of staff in Swedish pre-school centres are trained to work with children. 60% have a three-year tertiary degree; the remaining 38% have a senior secondary, three-year vocational training in "Children and Leisure-time Activities". Staff-child ratios are not regulated on a national basis, but they are monitored regularly. In pre-school centres the average ratio is 5.6 children per adult; in pre-school classes, the average ratio is 13 children per adult.

Pregnancy leave is available paid at 80% of earnings for mothers unable to continue with employment up to 60 days before birth. Parental leave is available lasting 390 days paid at 80% of earnings, a further 90 days at a lower flat rate, and a further 60 days unpaid. There is great flexibility about taking this leave either full-time or part-time up until the child is eight years of age. Of the 390 days, fathers must take 30 days parental leave on a use-it-or-lose-it (i.e., non-transferable) basis. Further, 10 days of paid paternity leave is available to fathers at the time of birth (which would normally be taken at the same time as the mother takes leave).

UNITED KINGDOM

Historically, responsibility for ECEC policy has been shared between national governments and local authorities, with considerable fragmentation of service delivery; ECEC services were not seen as an important public responsibility. Since 1997, the government has developed a plan of action to reform the early years system. In 1998, a National Childcare Strategy was announced, to be implemented by locally-based "Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships" in co-operation with local educational and social service authorities. Special funding for disadvantaged areas is provided for through the "Sure Start" initiative. An "Early Excellence Centre" programme has been established to test integrated approaches to care and education. Curriculum Guidelines for the Foundation Stage (3-5 years) have been developed. The Office for Standards in Education is mandated to formulate national standards to ensure clarity about the requirements for good quality service. A Childcare Tax Credit has been implemented for employed parents, targeted at low-income families. As a result of these initiatives, it is estimated that 1.6 million new childcare places will be available by 2004, and an additional 80,000 childcare workers will have been recruited. Further, local education authorities are mandated (by April 2004) to provide early education places for children from 3 years upwards. The responsibility for implementing policy and delivering outcomes has been assigned at the national level to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).

Compulsory education begins in the U.K. at 5 years of age. As of 2004, all 3 and 4 year olds are guaranteed access to free part-time pre-school education for at least 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week, 33 weeks per year. Where reception classes for 4 year olds exist, these children receive free public pre-school education for 6.5 hours a day during the school term. About 60% of this pre-school education for 3 and 4 year olds (generally known as nursery education) is available in public nursery schools and classes. Another 30% consists of places in private (i.e., fee-charging) schools, and a further 9% is provided by community and voluntary agencies.

For children less than 3 years of age, care provision is mostly private, including childminders, day nurseries and playgroups (many of these playgroups are run by church or voluntary associations). There are now Sure Start Programmes in 522 communities across England (focused on the 20% most deprived wards). All families in these communities are eligible and an average of 800 children 0-3 years of age are served in each community.

Twenty-six weeks of paid maternity leave is available plus a further thirteen weeks of unpaid leave. One or two weeks of paid paternity leave is available.

UNITED STATES

Responsibility for ECEC funding and policy is divided between states and the federal government in the United States. The federal government concentrates on funding services to children considered to be "at risk". Head Start and Early Head Start programs are managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.. The Child Care and Development Fund has consolidated four separate funding streams to provide child care funding from the federal government to the states. As part of welfare reform, through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the federal government provides additional funding to the states to expand provision of child care for welfare recipients seeking work. State policies towards child care and preschool education vary widely. Child care subsidies are in many states available to some low-income or disadvantaged families. There are moves towards universal access to pre-kindergarten programmes in many states.

At 0 and 1 years of age, about 20% of children are cared for by parents on a full-time basis, more than half are cared for in homes by a relative or in-home childminder, about 22% are in neighbourhood family child care and about 9% of children are cared for in centres. At 2 and 3 years of age, about 39% of children are in at-home or informal kinds of child care arrangements. About 20% of 2 year olds and 41% of 3 year olds are in centres, while nearly 50% of 3 year olds are in private, part-day, nursery school programs. About 60% of 4 year olds are enrolled in educational-type programs in nursery schools (some kindergartens). Almost all 5 year olds are enrolled in free part-time or full-time kindergartens in schools.

For new mothers working in firms with over 50 employees, there is a statutory right to a 12 week unpaid leave at the time of pregnancy, childbirth or illness. Employers can require that employees use their vacation and sick leave before claiming family leave. Workplace contractual agreements give paid maternity leave to some percentage of employees.

The average quality of centre-based care in the United States is not high. Only 14% of centres and 13% of family child care homes are estimated to be of good quality. Regulations governing child care vary across states. In general, legislated child-staff ratios are from 4:1 to 6:1 for infants, from 10:1 to 20:1 for 4 and 5 year olds, with ratios for 2 and 3 year olds being somewhere in the middle.

Apart from kindergarten services, most of the costs of child care are borne almost entirely by parents. Even with low child care worker wages and relatively low quality, the average price of child care in the U.S. is over \$4,500 (Canadian) annually. As a result, low-income families pay, on average, 18% of their income for child care and many families choose cheaper forms of care. The Dependent Care Tax Credit permits eligible parents to pay for part of the cost of child care with pretax rather than aftertax dollars.

Research on child care and education in the United States is much better funded, more ambitious, and better done than similar research in other countries. This is true of evaluation studies and of original research. Much of what we know about child care, quality and the development of children comes from U.S. research.