



A GREAT PLACE TO GROW PUBLIC CHILD CARE

Public child care profile: Sweden

An integrated system of early childhood education and child care

The early childhood education and child care (ECEC) system in Sweden is often used as an illustration of “getting it right” for children and families. Combined with comprehensive and generous parental leave, ECEC has been an important part of Swedish social policy for over three decades.

Since the early 1970s, Sweden’s national program has had the twin aims of making it possible for parents to combine parenthood with employment, and encouraging children’s development and education. Consistent with these twin goals is Sweden’s approach to blending child care, early childhood education and kindergarten into a new kind of program—the förskola, or preschool centre described at the end of this document—designed to provide children and families with a “seamless” day, one program that is neither solely child care nor solely kindergarten.

Why public early childhood education and child care?

Most people don’t think of non-profit community-based child care centres as “private”, but they are. That’s because parent or voluntary groups—not public entities such as municipalities or school boards—bear the responsibility for creating and maintaining centres. Almost all of Canada’s patchwork delivery of regulated child care services is private, relying on for-profit or non-profit services. And today, Canada is experiencing an alarming trend—a surge in for-profit child care. In some provinces, almost all new spaces are for-profit.

Children and families would be far better served by a public system that blends early childhood education and child care—in other words, publicly funded and delivered early childhood education and care programs managed and mostly operated by local governments or education authorities.

Here’s what well-designed public systems can deliver:

- Integrated early childhood education and kindergarten programs.
- Better access and inclusion of families—no matter where they live or their language, origins or abilities.
- More consistent quality.
- With small or no fees, all parents who want child care can afford it.
- Services that are planned and accountable to communities.

What we want

Our vision is a public system where every child can attend a program that blends early childhood education and care. The research and experience shows that systems based on privately funded and delivered child care are not a foundation for building blended, high quality ECEC programs.

Support public child care—it’s the way to go for a great place to grow.



Public provision

As in most European countries, most ECEC in Sweden is publicly operated. The program is primarily delivered by municipalities, with the national government providing overall policy direction and contributing a share of the funding.

The current picture

Coverage

The latest data on ECEC coverage (spaces) in Sweden show that in 2005:

- 97% of all four- and five-year-olds were enrolled in ECEC programs.
- 85% of two- to three-year-olds attended ECEC.
- 46% of one-year-olds attended ECEC.
- 76% of six- to nine-year-olds attend school-age programs (“leisure centres”).
- Generous maternity/parental leave provisions mean that enrolment of infants under one year old is rare; in 2005, only 30 infants under one year attended child care.

Funding

- In 2005, expenditure on the pre-school (zero to five) and school-age child care system was SEK 51.2 billion (\$7.8 billion CAD).
- Spending on ECEC represents 30% of the country’s education system budget.
- Sweden’s 2004 spending on ECEC for pre-school (zero to five) children was approximately 1.9% of its GDP. In contrast, Canada’s expenditure was only approximately 0.25% (UNICEF’s benchmarks—at least 1% of GDP for children aged zero to five years).

Parent fees

Since 2002, Sweden has set a limit on the maximum fees paid by parents:

- 3% of family income to a maximum of 1,260 kroner (\$193 CAD) per month for the first child in child care.
- 2% of family income for the second child (\$129 CAD max.), 1% for the third child (\$64 CAD max.), no charge for a fourth child.
- Starting at age four, children are entitled to 525 free hours of child care a year.

Roles of the central government and municipalities

Sweden has clearly defined roles for the national government and municipalities. The Swedish Ministry of Education and Science has responsibility for child care policy development, curriculum, goals and guidelines; there is considerable local autonomy in these areas. The National Agency for Education is responsible for data collection, research and evaluation. The national government provides block grants to municipalities, who combine these with funds from municipal taxes (municipalities have substantial taxation power in Sweden).

Municipalities make the final decisions on how funds should be spent, but are required by the national *Education Act* to provide sufficient child care for children one to 12 without unreasonable delay (defined as three to four months). Municipalities also have responsibility for monitoring the quality of services.

While ECEC is considered part of the education system, municipalities administer and operate the program rather than school boards. In most cases, ECEC for children aged zero to five is located separately from elementary schools. However, the “pre-school class” (for six-year-olds) and school-age child care tend to be integrated with schools.

Challenges

Developing a public ECEC system has not been without its challenges. In the past, differences between municipalities led to unequal provision around the country. For example, during the recession in the early 1990s some municipalities cut back on ECEC and increased parent fees. At that time, fees in some municipalities were less than SEK 8,000 a year, while in others they were more than SEK 20,000. During this same period, half the municipalities brought in rules that parents who became unemployed had to forfeit their ECEC spaces.

To meet these challenges, the national government took several steps to ensure equal access for all families. The right to a space was extended to unemployed parents as well as parents on parental leave with another child. In addition, a maximum parent fee was introduced in 2002. This was voluntary for municipalities, but since they would be financially compensated by the national government, they all chose to implement it. Finally, starting in 2003, children became entitled to 525 free hours of ECEC a year starting in the fall term of the year they turn four, until they start school.



Private child care

Policy analysts writing about Swedish child care note that private child care in Sweden means “not provided by the municipality”.¹

Privately run centres became more common in the 1990s, following the election of a centre-right coalition government. One of the first acts of the centre-right government was to table a bill on the “right of free establishment in child care”. This meant that centres could be run on private, including commercial, grounds. But privatization proceeded slowly, and today the majority of centres are still municipal, with private child care mostly provided by non-profit organizations or parent cooperatives. In 2005, 17% of the children enrolled in child care attended non-municipal pre-schools, and this figure had not increased in two years. Privately run child care is most common in suburban areas (where it accounts for 27% of provision) and large cities, and is least common in industrial towns and rural areas. Of Sweden’s 290 municipalities, 59 had no private child care in 2005.

Of historical note

1970s

The landmark 1968 Commission on Nursery Provision presented its report to Prime Minister Olaf Palme in 1972. This led to the first *Pre-School Act* in 1975. The *Act* made ECEC provision a mandatory responsibility of municipalities. ECEC expanded rapidly during this decade, but still struggled to keep pace with the increasing number of mothers entering the labour force. In 1976, an agreement between the

national and municipal governments set out a plan to create 100,000 new pre-school spaces and 50,000 new school-age spaces in a five-year period. While private, non-profit centres continued to exist, the majority of expansion was in the public sector.

1980s

As publicly operated ECEC became the most common form of provision, centre-right politicians began campaigning to encourage private (including commercial) providers. The ruling Social Democrat party rejected these calls, and in 1983 passed a law stating that government funding could not go to commercial child care, but could be accessed by parent cooperatives or non-profit centres.

1990s

Between 1991 and 1993, the Social Democrats were replaced in government by a centre-right coalition. One of the first acts of the new government was to table a bill allowing child care to be run on commercial grounds.

1998

Responsibility for ECEC was transferred from social services to the National Department of Education. The Curriculum for Pre-school (Lpfö 98) was introduced in August, and pre-school became the “first step in the education system for children”.

2000s

Following concerns about the increasing fees paid by parents, as well as variability of fees around the country, the Swedish government brought in rules for a maximum fee in 2002, with the difference in funding covered by the central government. In 2003, four- and five-year-olds became entitled to 525 free hours of child care a year.

A snapshot of early childhood education and care in Sweden

Farrah’s Story

Like most young children in Sweden in the late 1990s, Farrah attended the förskola (preschool centre) until she was five years old. She started attending as soon as possible after her family arrived in Sweden back in 1998, as her parents wanted her to settle into the new culture quickly. She spent 35 hours a week in the förskola, which, like most preschool centres, was run by the local municipality (commune). Her group at the förskola had its own rooms, and with 12 children and two adults, it had a relaxed and calm atmosphere. Both of the adults were preschool teachers, trained to degree level in early years child care and education.

Although there is a national preschool curriculum, it refers to general principles, such as democracy and openness, and goals, rather than specifying in a detailed way topics to be covered. The goals in the curriculum are broad objectives for teachers to aim for rather than targets that children must reach. Farrah’s personal development and learning were not formally assessed, and she learned about the world around her through play and activities. Usually, the group worked with themes, like water or seasons and constructed activities together around these topics.

[Excerpt from *A new deal for children?* (Cohen, Moss, Petrie and Wallace, 2004: 135-136).]

¹ Bergqvist and Nyberg, 2002: pg. 296



For your information

An informative video on the Swedish ECEC system, *Early Years: How they do it in Sweden*, is available at: <http://www.teachers.tv/video/12090> (Teachers' TV).

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