

Can Denmark's generous childcare system survive? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stine Christiansen was in no doubt she wanted to go back to work after having children.

"I really enjoyed the time with the kids", she explains, "It gives you a special connection when you have time with your small babies. But after that I really needed to get out again and be around adults and do real things, not just baby stuff."

So with three children still all under the age of four, Stine has just started a job working four days a week as a fibre-optics analyst.

In many countries the price of sending three children to daycare would be toe-curlingly expensive, but for Stine and her husband Thomas it's affordable.

The family lives in Denmark, in the small town of Værløse, just outside the capital Copenhagen, and in total they pay around five thousand kroner a month - about \$700 USD.

"I'm only working part time so it's not that I earn so much extra money for us", explains Tine, "but still it's definitely better than me not working."

This kind of affordable childcare is made possible because the Danish state subsidises it in a big way.

Local authorities are legally required to pay around three-quarters of childcare costs while parents make up the rest.

And the reason the state can afford to do this is because Denmark has one of the highest tax rates in the world, with the average Dane paying a total amount of 45% in income taxes.

Childcare everywhere

And it's no accident that this system helps Stine get back into work. State-supported childcare was expanded rapidly during the 1960s in response to a sharp rise in women joining the labour market, creating the distinctive model that survives today.

The result now is a country where a child growing up in Denmark is unusual if they don't go to childcare.

It's a short drive for Stine to drop the children off at Børnehuset Solbjerg (in English, Sun Mountain) kindergarten on her way to work, leaving them in the capable hands of the team of 'pedagogues', led by the manager Anne Kofod.

Her institution looks after 86 kids aged between one and five years old and out of all the parents only two mothers don't go to work.

"Even if they did not go to work they all have their children here," says Anna. "All around us there are no kids at home in the day, they are in a day care centre."

And it doesn't end there. Stepping outside to look at the garden Anne points out the neighbours.

"There's another day care on the other side of the fence. That one is double the size of this one.

And past the roundabout five hundred metres away there's another one."

Under pressure

Childcare institutions are everywhere, so it seems fitting that 98% of pre-school children are part of the day care system.

But it's a system that's beginning to buckle under financial pressure.

Denmark, like many governments across Europe has experienced its share of government belt-tightening since the 2008 financial crisis. The budget-cut axe has fallen on the welfare system - particularly pre-school childcare.

Dorthe Boe Danbjerg is the president of FOLA, the Danish Parents' Association. She's had children in kindergarten since 2005.

"Over the last few years there has been a cut in the number of pedagogues there are to take care of the children," she explains. "We expect high quality. We take our kids to kindergarten so that we can go to work ourselves and I think one of the major threats is that parents are not certain about the quality of the system any more."

Stig Brostrom Professor of early childhood education at Aarhus University argues that the future of Denmark's much-coveted system now hangs in the balance.

Too ambitious?

In a small office full of shelves groaning with books on the topic of bringing up children, his friendly demeanour belies a more pressing concern.

"Without being too dramatic, I will say that if we continue on this track for the next ten years we will lose our pre-school early childhood education success. It will be wasted."

So is it simply that the Danish childcare model is too ambitious - promising more than it can deliver to the parents who entrust their offspring to the nation's pedagogues?

"It is ambitious", admits Stig. "But I mean the children are the future. So if we really want to have a generation of young people who have social competencies, who have skills for innovation then of course you have to pay."

Where that money is going to come from in the future is also being called into question.

There's now a political movement towards lowering taxes for Denmark's higher earners, as a way of promoting economic growth.

So could lower taxes mean even less money to spend on the childcare system?

The Danish minister for children, education and gender equality, Ellen Trane Nørby, is optimistic. She argues that lower taxes will lead to more business activity, which in turn will expand the tax take.

"I see it as a possibility to have more people included into the labour market, having companies to earn more, having thereby to pay more tax," she argues.

"It's not only about sharing your small cupcake, it's about ensuring the economy will grow up as a big cake, because that will always allow a bigger percentage for reinvestment into the welfare system."

While Denmark's politicians wrangle over what policy direction will ensure a steady cash flow, back in Værløse it's evening bathtime for the Christiansen children.

Their dad, Thomas, is home from work, and he knows that despite everything, they've still got it good.

"I think we have a special system," he says, sleeves rolled up, trying to control the children's watery antics. "Taking things into consideration, having lived in the US for two years we are able to compare two quite opposite systems, where they have to pay for day care much more than we do here."

Stine agrees, that while not perfect, the Danish have a system worth sticking around for. "In fact we got the chance to go back again after having kids and definitely having the children was a big reason why we are still in Denmark and didn't go abroad again."

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