

Free for all? How Germany plans to tackle its childcare problem ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Studies show that, not only do parents pay radically different prices for childcare across Germany, the poorest are also hit hardest. Will plans to completely cut charges solve the problem?

A study released by the Bertelsmann Institute on Monday demonstrated the vast difference in costs for daycare centres (Kindertagesstätte, or Kita for short) across the country.

In Schleswig-Holstein in the far north, parents are paying on average nine percent of their after-tax income on childcare costs. Just across the border in Hamburg, the situation is completely different. In the port city, parents only pay an average of 4.4 percent of their income on childcare due to the fact that since 2014 every child under school age is entitled to five hours of free care a day.

In Berlin, the costs are even lower. The average parent in the capital pays just 1.8 percent of their salary on childcare. And from the summer childcare in Berlin will be completely free.

[Bar graph available online, "Germany's unequal fees: Share of household net income set aside by families for Kita fees"]

The wide variety in care costs across the country is just part of the problem. The Bertelsmann study also shows that poorer parents are burdened by childcare to a much higher degree than wealthy mums and dads.

The study, based on a nationwide survey of 10,000 parents, found that those at risk of poverty pay €118 on average, or 10 percent of their post-tax income. Wealthier parents on the other hand pay on average €178 a month, or five percent of their income.

An additional headache for the federal government is the varying quality of Kita care across the country.

Day care centres in the south of the country have a much better record of providing children with supervision than those in the east. In Baden-Württemberg, one carer looks after three children on average, while in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (in the far northeast) a carer looks after six children.

Free Kita for all?

The reason for the wide variation in Kita costs is that the size of the costs is normally set by local government, meaning that even within a state the costs are changeable.

Politicians have been aware of the injustices this can lead to for some time and various initiatives have been proposed.

Berlin will be the first of the 16 federal states to make Kita care completely free. But Lower Saxony and Hesse will soon follow suit - both states are set to abolish Kita charges by the end of the year.

But just abolishing the charges isn't in itself a solution. In Berlin, a lack of Kita places has led to parents having to sacrifice their own careers to stay at home with their kids. If you want to read more about the Berlin Kita crisis, [click here](#).

The federal government has also pledged to take action to create a more socially just Kita system.

Responding to the study, Families Minister Franziska Giffey said it was her goal to abolish charges for Kita care nationwide.

"A parent's income cannot be allowed to determine when and if a child is put into daycare. Therefore, we will bring in a law that will start us on the path to free daycare for all," Giffey said on Monday.

The federal government has already pledged to invest €3.5 billion in Kitas over the coming three years.

But the Bertelsmann Institute criticized this sum as being wholly inadequate for the task of creating free Kitas and improving quality in the poorer states. Such a task would cost €15.3 billion annually, the study argues.

The Bertelsmann Institute therefore advised the government not to pursue its goal of free daycare for all, but rather to create a universal system that charges parents according to their income.

"Nationwide, there is a lack of carers and the standard of care is not high enough in many parts of the country. Making care free for all would unnecessarily narrow the political space for improving quality," Jörg Dräger, head researcher on the study said in a statement.

Related link: [How a childcare crisis is leaving Berlin parents stuck at home with their kids](#) ^[3]

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