Finland's public childcare system puts the rest of the world to shame [1]

In Finland, 70 percent of preschool children attend a full day care service supported by the government. There's absolutely no reason why countries like the United States can't do the same.

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EXCERPTS

The autumn is a colorful time in Finland. The trees turn yellow and then red before the leaves fall. Neon pinks and yellows also appear — the reflective vests of toddlers and children venturing out to explore parks and cities with their day care teachers.

In Finland, these sights are omnipresent. The country's free or inexpensive public and private day care is, in many suburbs, so extensive that it seems every block might well have one. This autumn, my eighteen-month-old daughter has started in hers — a city-run public day care quite close to our home.

There, for a part of the day, she will join a group of twelve equally small kids while her parents go to work or study. Among other activities, she plays with friends, goes on nature trips, and visits the library.

Day care is a place for children not only to engage in play, get nutritious meals, and improve their immune systems, but also to prepare for education and for wider society. The children are cared for by skilled caretakers, too — like schoolteachers, early childhood education teachers in Finland have generally been university-educated since 1995.

Of course, the idea of day care for children existed before then — it's existed for as long as people have opted to care for each other's children to free the others to do work. The first kindergarten in Finland, intended for children of workers in the working-class suburbs of Helsinki and subsidized by corporations, was established as early as 1888; four years later, the education for kindergarten teachers began. Finland, then an autonomous part of Russian Empire, was the first Nordic country to introduce it.

Municipalities were permitted to establish day cares in 1919, but at first only a few chose to do so. Only since the postwar period has day care been formalized as a crucial aspect of the welfare state. The current form of the Finnish day care system dates to 1973, when the government passed the Act on Children's Day Care, mandating municipalities to offer sufficient day care to meet the local need. This was, step by step, expanded to the so-called subjective right to day care, the requirement to organize a day care spot for every child in need of one, no matter their parents' economic situation — a cornerstone of the Finnish system ever since.

This process was always aided by the efforts of cross-party MPs, particularly women. In more recent times, though, the subjective right has come under fire, especially from the Right, as it includes cases in which one parent stays at home — for example, due to unemployment. The fact that parents may stay at home while recovering from mental health issues, for instance, was overlooked.

This criticism led to the subjective right being temporarily limited as a national mandate by a center-right government in 2018, although many municipalities chose to keep it; the current center-left government has since restored it, though, taking the multiplicity of situations in which parents may stay home into account.

At present, then, every Finnish parent, if they so wish, may put their under-school-age children into day care; the municipalities are required to find a place for every one of them. This is not always an easy task, especially considering the importance of keeping day care spots close at home — not every suburb is as well-served as ours. In practice, queue systems are often used for the most popular locations.

In the 1970s, the main function of day care was freeing parents, chiefly women, to become a part of the labor force. However, in later decades, the pedagogical function of day care has moved to the fore, with day care often considered a crucial step for preparing children for school and studies. The last year of day care generally functions as a preschool.

In fact, the preferred term for the whole institution is not "day care" but "early childhood education," and the Act of Early Childhood Education in 2015 codified this pedagogical transformation. This educational element is supported by the government's commitment to keeping day care well funded — the aim is one adult for every four children at Finnish day cares, the lowest ratio of all OECD countries.

Like many other institutions of the welfare state, day cares have had to face the challenge of the COVID pandemic and at times this goal

has been missed. But the commitment to proper funding remains and, as a rule, the state has kept children's activities — day cares and schools — as open and normal as possible, instead aiming restrictions at adults.

Crucially, day care is not the only option provided by the Finnish state to parents. Parents who wish to keep their little ones at home can quite easily do so, bolstered by a home care subsidy — a few hundred euros from the state per month, often with extra municipal subsidies. In the past, this subsidy has sometimes been criticized as a measure that keeps women at home, but many parents see it instead as an extension of free choice, allowing them to find an option that works according to their personal situation.

Many families will end up choosing to utilize day care at some times and to keep the children home at others. Another option is family-based day care, which sees children cared for by a trained worker in their own homes or in someone else's home instead of in a day care facility. Whatever choice families make, they can partake in the holistic network of institutions making up the Nordic welfare state.

This welfare state allows for variety in the specifics. Political parties and families debate the best approaches to implementation and use; some, for example, disagree on how young kids should be when they start day care.

Nevertheless, at some point all parents — no matter their ideology or views on childcare — will have an option available. Conservative, liberal, and socialist parents send their kids to the same day cares, confident they will be cared for and given the opportunity to learn new things. The day care does not intend to replace the family; it complements its efforts and works hand in hand with it.

This is proof that the welfare state and society and culture do not work against each other; rather, they work in tandem. Like so many other parts of the welfare state, day care provision is today a cause for all parties, not just those on the Left. It has, in a word, become normal.

Like my child, I went to a day care myself in the 1980s. Other day care attendees today will have not only parents but grandparents who also went to day care. All of us have benefitted from this universal day care provision — and so will future generations.

Region: Europe [3]

Tags: public management [4]
women's labour force participation [5]
