

# Norway law decrees: Let childhood be childhood <sup>[1]</sup>

In the Scandinavian country, early childhood education is a national priority, enshrined in law

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## Excerpts

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Norway's model comes from a deep-seated belief that creating productive, contributing members of society starts at birth. The country offers robust social support for residents, making occurrences like the 2011 attacks that much more shocking. Investing in early childhood is seen "both as an investment for the society and an investment for the child," said Kristin Aasta Morken, program leader of the city of Oslo's initiative for upbringing and education. Unlike in America, no attempts have been made to lower age requirements for kindergarten teachers or increase student-teacher ratios and group sizes, and there have been few debates over whether child care is ruining children or families. Ironically, Norway's policies have been inspired in part by American studies that found language gaps between higher- and lower-income children, as well as a high return on investment for early childhood programs.

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The countries' priorities are different as well. Each year, nearly 1.4 percent of Norway's GDP is spent on early childhood programs, compared with less than 0.4 percent in America. Public funding covers 85 percent of operating costs for child care programs. The tuition parents pay has been capped at 2,000 kroner (about \$190) a month for the first child, with a 30 percent discount for the second. Tuition for a third child is free. This applies to both public and private programs, including in-home centers, giving parents some choice. Programs receive funding based on the number of children served, with sites drawing double the amount of money for each child under 3 to account for lower student-teacher ratios.

Norwegian children are guaranteed a spot in a kindergarten after they turn 1, around the time many parents' paid leave ends. All kindergartens are governed by the same framework and requirements, designed to protect the sanctity of the early years. If parents don't send their children to child care, they receive financial assistance to keep them at home.

Norwegians are so serious about the right to child-centric early care, they wrote it into law. The country's Kindergarten Act, which took effect in 2006, states that child care programs must acknowledge "the intrinsic value" of childhood. Programs must be rooted in values including forgiveness, equality, solidarity and respect for human worth. Through kindergartens, children are meant to learn to take care of each other and develop friendships. Programs are ordered to respect children, "counteract all forms of discrimination" and contribute to a child's well-being and joy. They must be designed around the interests of children and provide activities that allow children to develop their "creative zest, sense of wonder and need to investigate."

That doesn't mean kids run free all day, though at times it can look like that. "If you're standing outside a Norwegian kindergarten or just passing through, I would think you are looking at chaos," said Anne Karin Frivik, head of kindergartens in the Bjerke borough of north Oslo. "But for us on the inside, it's organized chaos. The autonomy of the child, the child's own ability to choose and to learn and to interact, it's very, very highly appreciated."

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