

Play: The Swedish way [SE]^[1]

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Author: Sundelin, Jenny

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EXCERPTS

British policymakers frequently cite Sweden as a good example of childcare provision, so what do the two countries do differently?

Childcare options

The British pre-school options for parents consist of day nurseries, toddler groups and pre-schools. In addition there are crèches (for children up to eight years old), or childminders and nannies (for children up to 12 years old). Parents also have the option of sending their child to playgroups or out-of-school clubs after they have started school. All childcare has to be registered and inspected by Ofsted.

Childcare in Sweden is organised in a similar way with pre-schools (day nurseries), family daycare homes (run by municipal childminders), open pre-schools and leisure time centres (equivalent to out-of-school clubs). All pre-school establishments also have to be assessed by the government and meet certain standards.

However, while most pre-school childcare is provided by the private sector in the UK, Swedish nurseries are financed partly by central government grants, partly by tax revenue and partly by parental fees. Community and council nurseries do exist in the UK but they are not as commonplace as private nurseries.

Free early learning

Four and five-year-olds in Sweden are offered at least three free hours a day during school term. Sweden also has a maximum fee policy which states parents should only have to spend between 1% and 3% of the family's income on childcare, depending on how many children they have.

The UK government offers three and four-year-olds 12.5 hours of free early learning a week; this should apply to all forms of childcare for at least 38 weeks of the year, but there is no guarantee of getting a place with a particular provider.

Childcare fees

Sweden's maximum fee policy means everyone has affordable childcare. Parents do not have to rely on other welfare benefits to the same extent to cope with pre-school costs.

The maximum rate is limited to 1,260 SEK (around £102) a month for the family's first child (based on full-time care). Usually a family pays less for their second and third child - around 0.25% or 1% of the family's income.

There is no such thing as a maximum fee policy in Britain. Those with children under three may have to dig deep to pay for care. According to a recent survey by childcare charity the Daycare Trust, the cost of a nursery place for a two-year-old has increased more than twice the rate of inflation in England. Nurseries are more expensive than childminders, and a typical nursery place for a child under two is now £8,268 a year in England, £7,384 in Wales and £7,332 in Scotland.

Help with costs

The UK government provides means-tested funding to help families. Claims of up to 80% of childcare costs can be made through the UK working tax credit. There are also job grants for those who have been unemployed and are returning to work, or child maintenance premium for those receiving income support or jobseekers' allowance. In addition there is a tax-efficient employer-supported childcare system, which is worth up to £1,066 a year.

Britain also has the New Deal for Lone Parents to support unemployed people with affordable childcare while they work towards getting off benefits. New welfare reforms, due to come into force in October, state that income support will no longer be available solely on the grounds of being a lone parent.

The paradox that parents are faced with is that although help to get a job should increase equal opportunities, it is also a worry since out-of-school fees have escalated as well. The Daycare Trust reports they have risen by more than six times the inflation rate, with typical costs of £43 for 15 hours a week.

The workforce

Mother-of-two Ditte O'Connor is Swedish but has lived in the UK for several years.

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"In the UK I only ever saw up to three children per adult in nurseries for children under three, whereas in Sweden the groups are larger with fewer adults. On the other hand there is a larger mix of ages, which is not a bad thing," says O'Connor.

There are also more men working in childcare in Sweden than O'Connor has seen in the UK.

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The Swedish workforce in childcare is made up of almost 5% of men in pre-schools and nurseries. In the UK the proportion of male nursery staff has stayed at 1% for over 10 years.

Reading and writing

Ninni Olofsdotter Schulman is Swedish and lives in Stockholm. She has two children, Signe and Sven.

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"I did a lot of reading and writing at home with my kids," says Olofsdotter Schulman. "Signe can read and Sven knows all the letters in the alphabet. I don't think their knowledge came entirely from their time at nursery. In a way I think Swedish pre-schools could be a bit more educational, in a playful way of course."

Outdoor play and social interaction

David Brown is English but lives in Sweden with his family. He is skeptical about early years education in the UK.

"I believe there is too much pressure on children in the UK too early on. I think guidance is more than enough," says Brown.

He also points out that outdoor activity is part of the key structure in Swedish pre-schools. Sweden has vast outdoor spaces but green parks and other child-friendly public areas are limited in big cities in the UK.

"My kids play outdoors all the time and the nursery takes them out on forest excursions and visits to the park on a regular basis. Sweden definitely focuses more on interpersonal skills than the UK does," he says.

Although the British pre-school curriculum acknowledges the use of learning through play, it also emphasises goals and assessing the child's progress. The Swedish system is more concerned with guidelines and basic values such as care and consideration towards others, solidarity, gender equality and tolerance, none of which can be measured on an academic level.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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