

# Daycare, Norwegian-style [CA] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

I recently spent some time in Norway visiting my grandchildren. Both my daughter and her husband have full-time jobs; their preschool children (18 months and 4 years) both attend the local "barnehage" - the Norwegian daycare centre. My last visit coincided with my son-in-law's going on an extended business trip and, as it fell to me to transport the kids to and fro, I became quite familiar with the inner workings of the barnehage.

When I returned to Canada, I discovered that a vigorous debate was under way on how government policy should deal with daycare for preschool Canadian children. Here's what I learned about the barnehage system - who finances it and what its goals and objectives are.

First, the barnehage is not just a babysitting service. The system clearly establishes goals for each child that encompass physical, mental, social, musical and cultural development. Norwegians love the outdoors - rain, snow or shine - and young children are not only encouraged but expected to spend time outdoors in vigorous physical activity. Once a week, the four-year-olds in my grandson's class trek to a camp site and spend the day in rugged surroundings, where there is a big tent for shelter if it is raining or snowing, and where all sorts of outdoor activities are organized.

The system maintains a staff/student ratio of 1 to 4 for three-year-olds and older (the maximum class size is 18), and a ratio of 1 to 3 for those younger than 3 (maximum class size is nine). Each class has a teacher with an education degree and several assistants (who don't require formal education qualifications). Each barnehage has a principal, and most are housed in dedicated physical facilities that are first class.

To finance the program, parents are charged about \$500 a month for each child, with a 30-per-cent discount for a second child. The central government contributes about \$7,000 a year for each child over 3, and \$14,000 for each child under 3. If parents decide to look after their children at home, they are given a tax-free grant of \$7,000 a year. As well, the local municipality is responsible for the planning and supervision of all barnehage, whether public or private, and makes a financial contribution roughly equal to that of the state.

The salaries of barnehage staff range from \$40,000 to \$50,000 for the assistants and \$60,000 to \$70,000 for the teachers. The salaries and costs are high by Canadian standards, but Norway's minimum wage is about \$35,000 a year and the cost of living is very high.

The quality of daycare at the barnehage is usually first class, and kids have a tremendously supportive environment in which to develop - yet the family also enjoys strong support, reinforced by the attitude of most of Norway's employers. They recognize that an employee who is worried sick about the care their child is getting is not a good employee. Employers go out of their way to emphasize that family responsibilities can often take precedence over work; consequently, employers are rewarded by employees who go the extra mile. Employees are also given generous time off to care for sick children.

Of course, no country is perfect, and Norway has many problems. But the way the Norwegians provide support for families dealing with the vexed issue of daycare should give Canadians pause for thought.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** federal programs <sup>[4]</sup>

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