

Sweden sounds like Eden for working parents [UK]^[1]

Author: Arenander, Inger

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EXCERPTS

Americans are still arguing the pros and cons of full-time day care, yet the Swedes are making it more widely available. Fees are being capped and funds set aside for improving quality. Also, paid parental leave is being extended to 13 months.

Working mothers, would-be working mothers and stay-at-home moms, imagine this: Full-time preschool child care, including meals, for slightly more than \$100 a month for one child, another \$70 for a second, \$33 for a third. That's tops; many families will pay less.

Starting next January, these will be the suggested caps on the cost of universal preschool child care for children 1 to 5. Virtually all municipalities, the largest providers of state subsidized child care, are expected to go along, in an effort to make it easier for women to work and to retain more of their earnings. The Swedish government has agreed to increase its subsidies to offset the centers' lost revenues.

In a nation of almost 9 million inhabitants, 64 percent of children 1 to 5 attend preschool, and capping child care fees is highly popular. National legislation only passed last fall, however, after a long and heated debate in the Swedish Parliament.

Critics say caps on child-care fees does not go far enough because it only covers group preschools organized by municipalities and does not compensate parents who choose private or cooperative preschool, or who decide to care for their own children at home. And the critics claim the new policy, which ends a sliding-scale fee structure based on income, favors the rich who can afford to pay more.

The proposal of maximum preschool fees was put forward by Sweden's Social Democratic government in the last parliamentary election in 1998. During an economic recession in the early 1990s, preschool fees were raised in many municipalities at the same time as state subsidies were cut.

Municipalities are required to provide preschool to all children 1 to 5; 6-year-olds also may attend free kindergarten preparation classes; regular school starts at age 7. Students 7 to 11 usually may remain after school for help with homework, special tutoring, music, sports, enrichment programs and excursions. Professional teachers supervise these activities and children receive a light meal.

Schooling is free for all students 7 to 18. Children's health care is practically free. Most people are protected by an extensive social security system providing health care, parental leave, unemployment support and other benefits.

Sweden's generous subsidies of child care and other benefits are made possible by high income taxes, ranging from 30 percent to 55 percent.

Debates, like the furor in the United States over whether day care is good for children, are virtually unheard of in Sweden where there is a national consensus about the benefits of and need for quality, affordable day care.

Currently in most Swedish municipalities, preschool fees are charged on a sliding scale geared to parents' income. With its progressive tax system, many unemployed and low-income parents had little incentive to improve their earnings because more income meant higher taxes and higher child care fees. Some families even lost money by working more.

Today, Sweden's improving economy has created an urgent and increasing need for labor, and the government is trying to make it easier and more profitable for women to work full time. An aging population and a reduced birth rate make it necessary to improve the situation for families with children.

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