

# The worst child care in Europe: Scandal of Britain's benefits [GB]

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

British parents are getting the worst deal in Europe when it comes to maternity benefit and childcare.

Experts are now warning that the country is facing a population crisis because women are increasingly put off having children by the high cost.

Professor Peter Moss of the Institute of Education says: "We urgently need to review our system of childcare before it is too late."

Women in the UK are having 1.6 children compared with more than 2.5 in the 1960s.

"They get hit by a double whammy," says Prof Moss. "They are poorly paid while they're on maternity leave. Then those who do go back to work have to pay out huge amounts of money on childcare. For many it's proving not worth having children."

Other EU nations have heavily subsidised childcare while Britons face the highest childcare bill in Europe - and they are getting higher.

We pay at least 75 per cent of the overall cost of childcare, but in Europe it is no more than 30 per cent and often less.

The Sunday Mirror compared the UK with five other European countries:

## BRITAIN

**MATERNITY PAY:** £2,458 (£61.45 per week). From April 6, new measures will up this to £3,558.

**COST OF CHILDCARE:** It's thought there are fewer than 30,000 places available in state-run nurseries. Parents pay at least 75 per cent of the cost of childcare.

The typical cost of a nursery place for a child under two is now £120 a week, or more than £6,200 a year. The cost of a full-time place with a childminder works out at £113 a week.

Prof Moss says: "Some employers - like the NHS, HSBC and Ford UK - run company creches. But the latest figures suggest no more than five per cent of firms offer any kind of assistance with childcare.

"Research in the mid-90s found that just two per cent of children under three were in publicly-funded childcare.

"One of the most helpful things the government could do is to make nursery school last a full day rather than just half a day. That would make a big difference to working parents."

## FRANCE

**MATERNITY LEAVE:** 16 weeks

**MATERNITY PAY:** £4,909 (£306.81 a week)

**COST OF CHILDCARE:** A childminder costs about £7 an hour.

Virtually all nurseries are run by the state but there are huge waiting lists to get into them. Parents pay about £200 a month but also receive a 25 per cent tax rebate.

In Paris alone, an estimated 200,000 children are waiting for nursery places. To help parents, some large employers such as county councils run creches.

The government is also paying National Insurance contributions for nannies and private childminders to help cut lists.

And there is growing pressure on schools with room to take children as young as two.

Prof Moss says: "France has a well-established system but it is under pressure. All children above the age of three go to full-time school.

Under that, care is mostly provided by state-funded nurseries. The government also offers parents the right to three-year parental leave but at a very low rate of pay."

## ITALY

MATERNITY LEAVE: 47 weeks

MATERNITY PAY: £6,058 (£128.89 a week)

COST OF CHILDCARE: There are state-run creches for kids under three which charge on a sliding scale according to factors such as whether the parents work.

They're free if parents earn below £10,000 a year but if not, charges can be as high as £250 a month and places are often oversubscribed.

A private nursery would cost about £300 a month and childminders charge around £8 an hour.

## SPAIN

MATERNITY LEAVE: 16 weeks

MATERNITY PAY: £4,615 (£288.43 a week)

COST OF CHILDCARE: Most nurseries are private but relatively cheap. Parents pay about £120 a month for 9am-to-5pm nursery care five days a week. A childminder works out at about £6 an hour. Parents also receive about £66 a month in child benefit.

Prof Moss says: "Spain is similar to Italy in that traditionally the children were looked after by the mother so there are very few state-funded places."

## SWEDEN

MATERNITY LEAVE: 96 weeks

MATERNITY PAY: £6,000 (£62.50 per week)

COST OF CHILDCARE: All children over 12 months are entitled to a publicly-funded nursery place. On average, parents pay a contribution of just under £100 a month.

Prof Moss says: "Sweden is the benchmark for state childcare in Europe. They have a system which combines flexible parental leave with affordable childcare.

"Just three per cent of all children aged 12 months to six years are looked after by relatives or childminders with 76 per cent cared for in state nurseries. These cost approximately £100 a month or no more than three per cent of a parent's income. And for children under 12 months old, mothers have well-paid maternity leave.

"The workplace is also very flexible. Parents have the legal right to 16 months' well-paid parental leave which is extra to maternity leave and to work shorter hours to be with their children."

## GERMANY

MATERNITY LEAVE: 14 weeks

MATERNITY PAY: £4,038 (£288.43 a week)

COST OF CHILDCARE: Children over the age of three go to publicly-funded kindergarten.

For younger children, mothers have traditionally stayed at home to care for them. The government encouraged this by introducing a law which forced companies to hold their jobs open for three years after the birth of their child.

The cost of childcare varies according to region. Generally, parents have the right to send their child for a certain number of hours to a state nursery. The cost is dependent on income and the number of children. The average is about three per cent of a family's income.

The system heavily favours low-income families. For instance, a single mother on a low income with one child pays about £20 a month for child care.

Prof Moss says: "Germany is still feeling the effects of reunification. Under communism many women worked and had childcare provided by the state."

-Reprinted from The Sunday Mirror

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

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