

Sweden's childcare allowance 'a fiasco' ^[1]

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Sweden's childcare allowance, strongly promoted by the Christian Democrats as a way to help parents who wish to spend more time at home with their young children, has been a fiasco, according to a previously unreleased report.

Barely 2 percent of parents who have the right to take advantage of the programme actually did so in the first half of 2009, a government-ordered study from Statistics Sweden (SCB) shows.

"We're not satisfied with the results," Martin Kits, a spokesperson for Christian Democratic head Goran Hagglund, told The Local on Monday.

The study, first made public by the Feministiskt perspektiv news website, was ordered in October 2010 by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs headed by Hagglund.

Kits insisted the report wasn't purposefully kept secret, telling explaining that government agencies are responsible for publishing their own studies.

He also downplayed the study's results, which show that about 3,000 families took advantage of the programme, explaining they are based on figures from 2009.

"And there are indications that participation in the programme increased in 2010," he said.

The idea behind the childcare allowance (vardnadsbidraget), which provides parents with up to 3,000 kronor (\$430) tax-free per child per month, is to give families the ability to stay at home a little longer with their young children once their parental leave benefits have been used up.

In effect since July 1st, 2008, the childcare allowance is available to parents of children aged one to three years old who forego the option of sending their children to a publicly financed preschool.

Parents are allowed to continue working, but the benefit can't be combined with traditional parental leave payments, unemployment insurance benefits, or other forms of economic support.

The programme, currently made available on a voluntary basis in 104 of Sweden's 290 municipalities, has long courted controversy, with critics arguing that it was a tool to keep women in traditional childrearing roles.

According to Kits, the government ordered the study to see how many of Sweden's municipalities offered the childcare allowance as part of tracking how the reform had been implemented.

Sweden's main teachers union, Lararforbundet, has previously warned that the programme would likely lead to increased segregation by allowing unemployed immigrant parents and their children to isolate themselves at home, rather than engage with different aspects of Swedish society.

Despite the programme's low participation rate, the Christian Democrats remain committed to giving Swedish parents more childcare options.

"The childcare allowance is one of many possible ways to give families the freedom to arrange their childcare needs in a way that best suits their situation," said Kits.

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Ulrika Hagstrom, a gender equity expert with the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees (TCO), a white-collar trade union, told DN that the childcare allowance ought to be scrapped.

"When interest is as low as the SCB study shows, it's evidence that we're happy with (state-subsidised) daycare and the current two-parent model of childcare," she said.

- reprinted from The Local

Region: Europe ^[2]

Tags: funding ^[3]

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