

What Britain could learn from Denmark's childcare model ^[1]

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 18 Feb 2012

EXCERPTS:

Denmark's flexible work culture and extensive, affordable, childcare mean a huge proportion of mothers can return to work.

"I never once thought about not going back to work after having Martha," says Mette Miller-Harris, cuddling her 13-month-old daughter.

"The only person who asked me whether I had thought about giving up my job was an English friend."

As Martha totters across the wooden floorboards of the Copenhagen flat of Mette and her husband, Christian, the 34-year-old ministry of justice lawyer adds: "I don't know anyone who is a stay-at-home mother, and none of my mother's friends was either. Nearly all women go back to work after having children in Denmark."

The flexible-hours culture in Denmark means that either Mette or Christian can pick Martha up between 3pm and 4pm. Christian, 33, who is building a career as a freelance scriptwriter, said: "We get to spend a lot of time with Martha. Fathers here are very involved in their children's lives. Most men I know take about three months' paternity leave."

He points out that, while they both have to work for financial reasons, what makes their setup viable is the affordable cost of childcare. In Denmark families pay up to 25% of the cost of day care, with those on low incomes or single parents paying between nothing and 25% of the cost, with discounts for siblings. The government makes up the difference.

When Maiken Holmgard, 32, and her partner, Mads Buddig, 36, had their son Sylvester, now six, she was studying to be a special needs teacher. "I took him to lectures when he was a baby and he started nursery at one, when I got my first job. We didn't have much money, so we had a discounted price of less than 700 krone (£78) a month. It would have been hard to manage if we'd have had to pay more."

The couple now have two sons. Meyer, two, attends the nursery and Sylvester the pre-school at a daycare centre overlooking the harbour, near their Copenhagen flat. Sitting at the kitchen table tucking into cinnamon buns that he baked himself, Mads, a graphic designer, explains how his income has been hit by the economic downturn. "We now pay around 4,000 krone (£446) a month for the two of them. With the boys in day care, at least we can both work. We have friends who moved back to Denmark from England two weeks ago and have a six-month-old. They are academics and were worrying about the cost of childcare."

Mette and Maiken are not alone: most women with children work in Denmark. As a result, the country is ranked fifth for female employment among the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Britain is 15th.

The cult Danish political TV drama *Borgen*, which charts the challenges faced by Denmark's first female prime minister, is a favourite at Westminster. But now British politicians are looking at Denmark for more than entertainment. It is the way the Danes organise their maternity and paternity leave, childcare and family policy that interests them.

Both Labour and the coalition government are looking at ways to increase the number of women in the workplace as a way of boosting long-term economic growth. The Resolution Foundation, a thinktank, calculates that a million women are "missing" from the UK workforce because of a lack of funding for childcare, unbalanced parental leave and the way in which tax credits and allowances do not sufficiently encourage women to return to work.

Britain is one of the biggest investors in families across the OECD countries, spending 3.6% of its GDP on family benefits in 2007. Only Denmark and France spent more, at 3.7% each.

But it is how this money is spent that is under scrutiny. In terms of better outcomes – such as the ability to lift children out of poverty and to increase female employment – Britain lags behind countries that spend less, such as Sweden and Finland. The Nordic countries tend to spend more on services to families than cash benefits. The UK does it the other way around.

In the UK, 10% of state spending on family policy goes towards maternity and paternity leave, compared with 17% in Denmark. Some 26% of the spending in the UK is on day care, compared with 49% in Denmark. The largest proportion of family-related state spending in the UK is on tax credits, at 29%, compared with zero in Denmark.

The eye-watering cost of childcare in the UK has become a barrier to work for many women. A survey by the Daycare Trust found that a full-time nursery place in England for a child aged under two costs an average of £193 a week. Prices in London and the south-east are far higher. State-funded childcare in the UK starts at three – or two for lower-income families – and is limited to 15 hours a week.

Parents in Britain spend on average one third of their net household income on childcare, compared with an average of 13% in other major economies, according to OECD figures.

A recent Save the Children survey found that the high cost of day care, coupled with cuts in working tax credits and child tax credits, caused one quarter of low-paid parents to give up their jobs. Even well-paid professional women in Britain, such as lawyers and accountants, who use nannies because they do not finish work until after nurseries shut, complain that, after paying their nanny's salary, tax and national insurance contributions, they see little of their own after-tax earnings.

Across the earnings spectrum, women who have been out of the labour force find it hard to get back in. Studies on the effect of career breaks show that even a few years away has a huge impact on lifetime earnings and pension rights.

At the Snorretoppen day care centre last Thursday, toddlers – including Maiken and Mads's son, Meyer – played in the February sunshine. Inside, in rooms decorated with paintings of giraffes and dragons, another group took part in a gym class. This is one of the capital's more

popular centres and it has scores of children on the waiting list.

In Denmark, 97% of children aged three to five and 92% aged one to two are in day care. While around 55% attend centres, the rest are looked after by registered childminders in private homes, which costs parents a similar amount.

Nursery worker Irene Gottlieb said: "We have one adult to three children in the nursery, one to four in the kindergarten and one to eight in the pre-school [ages five to six]. The children learn through play, they learn to be social and how to share. We give them three fresh, mostly organic, meals a day. Sometimes the children don't want to go home. There are 65 staff here, many with education degrees."

Most parents take a year off between them when they have a baby, thanks to generous parental leave entitlements, so most children start nursery around the time of their first birthday, although they are eligible from six months. Between three and six, they attend kindergartens. When they start school, there are after-school clubs. Most nurseries shut at 5pm, but there are some specialised centres which open late or at weekends for postal workers or actors.

No parent pays more than 25% of the cost – which equates to around £380 a month for one child in nursery (there are discounts for siblings), £250 a month for kindergarten and £160 a month for six- to nine-year-olds after school.

In the UK the more children women have, the worse their employment rates become compared with other countries. The female employment gap between Britain and the five best countries for women with one child is 12%, but among mothers with three or more children the employment gap widens to 24%.

The low cost of childcare, generous parental leave and the absence of a long-hours culture has meant that juggling a work-family balance is as much an issue for fathers as mothers in many Danish families. There is also a wide acceptance of high income tax rates of around 50%.

Mads, whose two sons attend Snorretoppen, said: "I'm sure there are some grumbles from people without children about why should they pay more tax to pay for kindergartens, but there are people who do not have a car who pay for the roads. Most understand we can't have high standards of education, childcare and health without paying for it."

Maiken has no qualms about her boys attending nursery. "We Danes want our children to grow up as we did," she says. "We went to daycare and loved it." Mads adds: "They are open to all children from all backgrounds. The children learn to be social, as well as being challenged and helped in a way some parents don't do at home."

In the UK there is much discussion among childcare experts on whether full-time nursery for children under two is good or bad. There is evidence that suggests that putting a child under two in full-time nursery may have some modest adverse emotional and behavioural effects in the long term.

However, there are also some equally modest positive effects on language and cognitive skills.

There is a similar debate in Denmark, according to Nina Refstrup of the Copenhagen Parents Organisation. "A lot of academics do research here into the effects of daycare on children. But the system is in place and this is what we do."

"Our concern at the CPA is that there are not enough staff, and there is too little space for the children. There have been cuts in the last two years and the municipalities are being given more powers on how to spend the budget on daycare. We think standards have dropped."

Sitting in her office next to the Christiansborg Palace, which houses the parliament, the prime minister's office and the supreme court, Christine Antorini, the minister for children and education, explains with some pride how the system works. "In the 60s, when many more women went into the workforce, society had to build something for the children. The economy was good so we could make the investment in childcare, schools and healthcare. The 70s were bad economically, but we didn't cut back on these things because it was seen as a right for women to go to work. With the current economic problems, some institutions have cut staff and there is some discussion from parents that this isn't good enough, but we don't have the discussion about not having them at all."

"More than 60% of day centre staff have a bachelor degree in pedagogical education. The staff work with language and physical development and how the children interact with each other."

She continues: "It is normal for women to work here. If you decide not to work after having children, that would be much more of a discussion – 'wow, you don't want to work, you just want to stay at home, why?'"

Not that this has led to gender equality on Danish boards. "In politics, 40% of MPs are now women. It is changing in business, with women reaching higher levels, but there are still too few women at the highest level."

Some would question the lack of choice that women in Denmark have about whether to work or not after having children. Few women work part-time in Denmark.

There is a debate in the Danish media between stay-at-home mums and career mums, with the former saying they feel victimised for not working and the latter claiming that they feel judged for "abandoning" their children – a common battleground on UK parenting websites. Mette admits that she has flashes of guilt. "I sometimes have a little bit of a bad conscience about Martha being at nursery. They say she's fine there and we believe them, but you don't really know. Sometimes I can tell she's had a bad day and I feel bad, but I wouldn't want the alternative: to be a stay-at-home mum. I want to be a good role model for my daughter."

Nursery worker Irene, 59, who has three children and three grandchildren, says: "Forty years ago, women stayed at home with their children. This has totally changed within two generations. When I was young, my children were at home with me. Everyone carries on working now. Daycare is a lot better standard, but I think people want two incomes for a better lifestyle."

However, Antorini, who brought up two children and three stepchildren, would not want it any other way. "The biggest punishment for me would be someone asking me to stay at home not working. I think this is the case for 99% of women. It is the culture here, families consisting of both parents working and looking after the children."

-reprinted from the Guardian

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