

Norway shows the way in childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

THE NORWEGIAN social commitment to children begins in the womb. Norway is ranked as the best place in the world to be a mother, with generous parental leave of 46 weeks at full pay or 56 weeks at 80 per cent pay. A child is entitled to a full childcare place in one of the many day-care centres, or barnehager as they are known, as soon as they are one year old.

The philosophy in Norway is that children are an integral part of society. This is closely linked with a drive for higher female participation in the workforce. There is general political consensus that the pre-primary sector is vital and needs to be expanded. An important element of this social agreement is that childcare fees should be affordable.

The Norwegian state heavily subsidises public and private day-care centres. There are also many payment rates which, in effect, mean that parents are means tested and charged accordingly. The maximum fee for a childcare place in Norway is set at NOK2,330 (€308) per month. By contrast, Irish parents pay an average of €144 a week for childcare services.

Norwegian kindergartens open from 7.30am to 5pm. The working day is short though, so in reality most parents collect children between 3.30pm and 4pm.

In Ireland, State-funded childcare is currently limited to the free year of preschool offered to children. Those who qualify receive three hours of childcare per day. While a step in the right direction, it does not address the issues of many Irish parents, who work full-time and without family support systems.

Minister for Children Frances Fitzgerald has said she would like to extend the existing scheme to two years of free childcare. It is estimated that it would cost €157 million to do this.

One solution might be to change the primary school starting age from four to five years or offer more support to children younger than three.

As it stands, some parents feel compelled into sending four year olds, who may not be socially or cognitively prepared, to primary school.

Ms Fitzgerald was in Oslo recently to attend a conference on early childhood education. It was a good opportunity for her and her team to examine closely how seriously Norway takes its social responsibility to children.

There are crucial differences between the way Ireland and Norway have managed the issue of childcare over the years. The childcare system in Ireland only really became a serious issue of debate during the Celtic Tiger years as work and family patterns began to change. Norway, on the other hand, has a long and established preschool tradition.

Ireland differs from Norway in that it offers a more complex model of childcare ranging from the voluntary, informal childcare, one-year preschool scheme and a variety of community- funded childcare schemes.

The Norwegian childcare system is heavily regulated and the standard of care is of a very high quality. Fitzgerald visited some Oslo childcare centres and was impressed with the level of stimulation and the interaction with the environment offered to young children.

The workplace is structured in a very family-friendly way in Norway. For example, it is not unusual for a child to be seen occasionally in a place of employment, while leaving to collect children after preschool is prioritised over work. There is also provision for parents to take time off to look after sick children.

The level of pre-primary school training in Norway is also very high, with close links between preschool and primary school education. There is no formal connection between the two sectors in Ireland.

Pre-primary teachers in Norway follow a three-year pre-primary educational programme at both university and college level. On completing courses, students are awarded either a bachelor's degree or a pre-primary teaching certificate.

In Ireland, there are varied standards of training in the childcare sector. Here, pre-primary education training schemes vary in length from one to two years.

Ireland now has an opportunity to implement measures which properly address the needs of its post-Celtic Tiger cubs and their families. The Norwegian model, while not perfect, can be emulated or adapted as a model. The real challenge is if there is the political will to do so.

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