

# Comparative child and family policy<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Journal abstract:

This special issue contains a set of papers prepared for a conference on "Comparative Child and Family Policy" held in honor of Sheila B. Kamerman on the occasion of her retirement from Columbia University School of Social Work. The papers collected in this issue provide a contemporary perspective on comparative child and family policy, highlighting new developments and current challenges for research and policy.

## Selected article abstracts:

**Setting the scene: The mix of family policy objectives and packages across the OECD**, Willem Adema, pp. 487-498.

Although changing in shape and form, families remain the cornerstone of society. Across the OECD Public policy supports families, but across countries the balance of underlying policy objectives can be different. For example, in some countries, family policy is largely driven by concerns about persistently low birth-rates while in others such concerns are not considered to be within the public domain. Across the OECD policymakers are concerned about child well-being and child development, but the intensity with which policy is driven by gender equity concerns varies considerably.

These different emphases on policy objectives affect the existing mix of policy measures, and it is therefore no surprise, that across countries, the relative importance of financial (cash and fiscal) supports, measures facilitating time for caring and family services (including childcare) also varies. However, for a coherent policy discharge it is vital that the different family policy tools fit together neatly, and do not leave families with gaps in support during the early life-course. Moreover, for equity and efficiency considerations it is important that policy starts to invest in families with children early in childhood, while many OECD countries still leave it until primary school for investment to take shape.

**Recent reforms in childcare and family policies in France and Germany: What was at stake**, Jeanne Fagnani, pp. 509-516.

Since the 1990s, dramatic changes in German family policy have occurred and legislators have increasingly placed more distance between themselves and the traditional male-breadwinner model through the introduction of new laws in the domain of parental leave and child care provision. France, for its part has continued to progressively consolidate and enhance its promotion of policies to support the work/family life balance along with steady increases in spending related to childcare provision. Despite a rise in its overall supply of formal childcare Germany, however, still lags far behind France in this domain, a phenomenon that can be partially explained by a combination of institutional obstacles, the persistence of social norms governing childcare for under-threes, and excessive demand.

I will try to answer the following questions: Why did the German and the French governments introduce reforms in family and childcare policy? What were the rationales underpinning these reforms and what were the key drivers of change? I will also highlight a number of recurrent issues that help to illuminate and explain the differences that persist between France and Germany in spite of recent reform efforts.

Finally, I will evaluate the success of these policies and whether they have achieved their desired effects on mothers' employment patterns, especially those of qualified female workers.

**The Nordic child care regime - History, development and challenges**, Niels Ploug, pp. 517-522.

In the Nordic countries child care is universal, of high quality and highly subsidised by the Government. Close to all children in pre-school age attend child care. This paper presents the historical background for the development of child care in the Nordic countries, it presents some basic figures on child care take and take up of leave schemes as well as figures on child poverty in the Nordic countries. The paper also contains a discussion of the challenges facing the Nordic Child Care Regime in relation to the poor results of many Nordic countries in the OECD-PISA program.

**Parental leaves and early childhood education and care: From mapping the terrain to exploring the environment**, Peter Moss, pp. 523-

Parental leave and early childhood education and care have gained a high profile in child and family policy fields, and both have been the subject of substantial cross-national mapping, describing and comparing their main features across a range of countries. This article provides overviews on parental leave and early childhood services in affluent countries, and reflections on this mapping. The article argues that such mapping is important and can still be taken further, to give 'thicker' descriptions of the policy terrain, but that more of another, related activity is required: exploration of the environment, using maps as one contextual tool to better understand what goes on within this terrain. It offers suggestions for comparative exploration of different national environments including the comparative study of pedagogical theories, values and practices. While the article takes a broadly positive, even enthusiastic, view of comparative work, it acknowledges that it has its dangers too, not least the problems that may arise from the increasing and uncritical acceptance of English as an academic lingua franca. In conclusion, the case is made for comparative research as an instrument for sustaining democracy, through its contribution to critical thought and awareness of alternatives.

**Child care and school performance in Denmark and the United States**, Gosta Esping-Andersen, Irwin Garfinkel, Wen-Jui Han, Katherine Magnuson, Sander Wagner, Jane Waldfogel, pp. 576-589.

Child care and early education policies may not only raise average achievement but may also be of special benefit for less advantaged children, in particular if programs are high quality. We test whether high quality child care is equalizing using rich longitudinal data from two comparison countries, Denmark and the United States. In Denmark, we find that enrollment in high-quality formal care at age 3 is associated with higher cognitive scores at age 11. Moreover, the findings suggest stronger effects for the lowest-income children and for children at the bottom of the test score distribution. In the U.S. case, results are different. We find that enrollment in school or center based care is associated with higher cognitive scores at school entry, but the beneficial effects erode by age 11, particularly for disadvantaged children. Thus, the U.S. results do not point to larger and more lasting effects for disadvantaged children. This may be because low income children attend poorer quality care and subsequently attend lower quality schools.

**Region:** International <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

work/life balance <sup>[5]</sup>

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