

Night nurseries: Sweden's round-the-clock childcare ^[1]

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Source: BBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Mar 2013

AVAILABILITY

Video online [BBC News] ^[2]

EXCERPTS:

As working parents around the world juggle their childcare issues, are Sweden's night nurseries the solution to unsociable hours?

Sweden has long had a glowing reputation for its generous childcare facilities and is regularly ranked as one of the best places to raise a family.

Each child is guaranteed a place at a public preschool and no parent is charged more than three per cent of their salary, with fees capped at SEK 1260 (\$197, £132) a month for the country's highest earners.

All other costs are covered by the state, which spends SEK 56.6bn (\$8.9bn, £5.0bn) a year subsidising preschool services, more than its annual defence budget.

Most public nurseries offer care from around 06:00 to 18:00. But with the numbers of parents working flexible or unconventional hours going up, local councils are increasingly providing overnight and weekend services.

In south-east Sweden, the small, former industrial city of Norrköping is among those already leading the way in out-of-hours care. There are four council-run nurseries open overnight here, the first of which launched 20 years ago.

"At first it was very hard to take my kids to sleep somewhere else and my heart was aching," says mother Maria Klytseroff, 39, a part-time care assistant for people with learning difficulties.

Her children spend about two or three nights a week at one of the preschools, which is more like a homely apartment than an education centre.

"I am a single mum and I wanted to go back to my job, which is at night," explains Maria.

"The children soon got used to it, they have friends and they adore the workers who look after them."

Eighteen children are registered at the nursery.

The toddlers arrive in time to eat dinner, clean their teeth and then enjoy a bedtime story with a member of staff.

Two-year-old Leon is dressed in blue striped pyjamas and cuddles several teddy bears as he curls up beneath a duvet covered in cartoon characters.

His older sister India, three, is wearing her favourite strawberry-print nightwear and has just finished a glass of milk.

In the morning, staff will zip them into their padded snow suits and wheel them by buggy to a nearby day centre while Maria sleeps off her night shift.

"I have travelled a lot, so I know that I am lucky compared to people in other countries," says Maria, who pays a total of \$112 (SEK 720, £75) a month in preschool fees.

Just over 78% of mothers with children under seven went out to work in 2012, according to Statistics Sweden's latest Labour Force Survey.

In Sweden, it is up to local government regions (known as municipalities) to decide whether they want to offer publicly funded out-of-hours care.

It is currently available in 123 out of 290 areas and used by almost 5,000 children.

Both single parents and couples are eligible to apply as long as their employer provides evidence of their shift patterns.

Hospital workers, restaurant workers, transport workers and shop staff affected by longer opening hours in recent years, are among those

who benefit from the service.

From July, the governing centre-right Alliance has promised to spend \$17m (SEK 108.5m, £11m) over the next four years to help more areas improve their services.

It says a lot about the nation's long-standing love affair with the welfare state that the main argument from opposition parties is whether that figure will prove to be enough.

"Sweden was earlier than other countries in terms of increasing women in the workforce and to make that possible we built up childcare," says Sweden's minister for gender equality, Maria Arnholm.

"We believe it is important that families can combine parenthood with work and that shouldn't just include those who work nine-to-five but also those who work inconvenient hours," she argues.

-reprinted from BBC News

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