

What it's like for a working mom in Oslo, Norway ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

The first article in a Slate occasional series ^[3] that asked parents from around the world to describe their child care experiences.

EXCERPTS

Name: Else Marie Hasle

Age: 32

Country: Norway

Occupation: Marketing professional (currently on maternity leave)

Partner's occupation: Senior engineer

Children: Natalia, 6, and Aksel, 22 months.

Hi, Else. What are your work hours?

When I'm not on maternity leave, my working hours are 37½ hours per week. This is a full-time job in Norway. I have flextime, so I can work 8 a.m to 4 p.m. or 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Who takes care of your kids while you work?

Up until roughly a year ago, our daughter went to a private day care in Oslo, which was government-sponsored (both private and public options are). You only pay about \$420 per month for a full-time spot. We got a place there because she was born before Sept. 1 and we applied before March 1, and because we lived in the same building as the day care. The residents in the building got prioritized.

One important thing that is quite frustrating for Norwegian families is that your child has to be born before Sept. 1 to have the right to a place in a day care in August the following year. This is the "magical deadline." Our son was born Oct. 8, 2012, and he could not get a place until this month, at 22 months old. If couples are young and they haven't succeeded getting pregnant "in time," some will often wait until next year to try again.

The Sept. 1 deadline has caused a problem for hospitals because there's a big baby boom right before and in the summertime, when most of the staff have their summer vacations. There have even been stories in the media about moms with early September due dates getting cesarean sections at the end of August to reach the deadline. You have the right to extend the parental leave up to 12 months after the paid parental leave (of about one year) ends, but then the second year will be unpaid.

You have to apply for day care by March 1. If you miss this deadline, even if your child is born before Sept. 1, you'll lose your right to day care the following year. This becomes a problem if you move in the middle of the year. When I was pregnant with Aksel, we bought a house in the suburbs of Oslo in June. In our new county, we couldn't get day care for our daughter, who was 4 years old at that time. Then we had to commute to Oslo with her in rush hour every weekday. We commuted like this for eight months, and it was totally exhausting for her.

When my partner got an offer in the Netherlands, it was very easy for us to decide to leave, as we were in the middle of this commuting with no day care spot for her in sight.

Why didn't you hire a nanny instead?

It is very hard to get a nanny, since that has almost disappeared from our culture, I guess because everyone has the right to day care. So it's not like you can buy your way out of the situation if you miss either deadline.

Also, the quality of Norwegian day care is very good. In my daughter's day care they went on excursions twice a week around the city and in the woods. She learned a lot and made a lot of friends. The focus is to socialize and to play. They are also outside in all kinds of weather, which I think is very unique and good about Norway.

For this reason, parents are very skeptical about nannies. We feel that day care centers are the safest places for kids. Nannies are also much more expensive than day care. (Prices vary from \$650 to \$1,300 per week. If the child is 12 months to 23 months, you'll get support

from the government: \$976 per month when the child is 12 months to 18 months and \$490 per month when the child is 18 months to 23 months.) And there are often waiting lists to get one.

What happens when one of your kids is sick?

Employees who have children under the age of 12 are entitled to have 10 days off in total to care for them. If you have two children under the age of 12, you have the right to 15 days off. Single parents have the right to double that amount.

In reality, it can be socially hard to be away from work this much. Unfortunately, I've heard of parents who have given their children paracetamol to lower their fevers and sent them to day care, hoping they won't notice.

Do you live near family that can help you take care of your children?

In Oslo, we lived about one hour from my parents. I often called my mom who works part time when our daughter was sick, and she drove into the city to be with her, as I tried to avoid missing work. However, many grandparents work full time, and it's not easy for them either to take time off.

Are mothers expected to be the "default parent," which is to say, the person who misses work when the kid is sick, or who deals with school events and other organizational parenting tasks?

It is not uncommon that men are home from work due to sick children. There are more mothers at school events, and mothers are probably home more with sick children, but fathers are very present as well. I would say it's about 65 percent mothers and 35 percent fathers at a parents' coffee afternoon in a day care at 3:30 p.m.

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