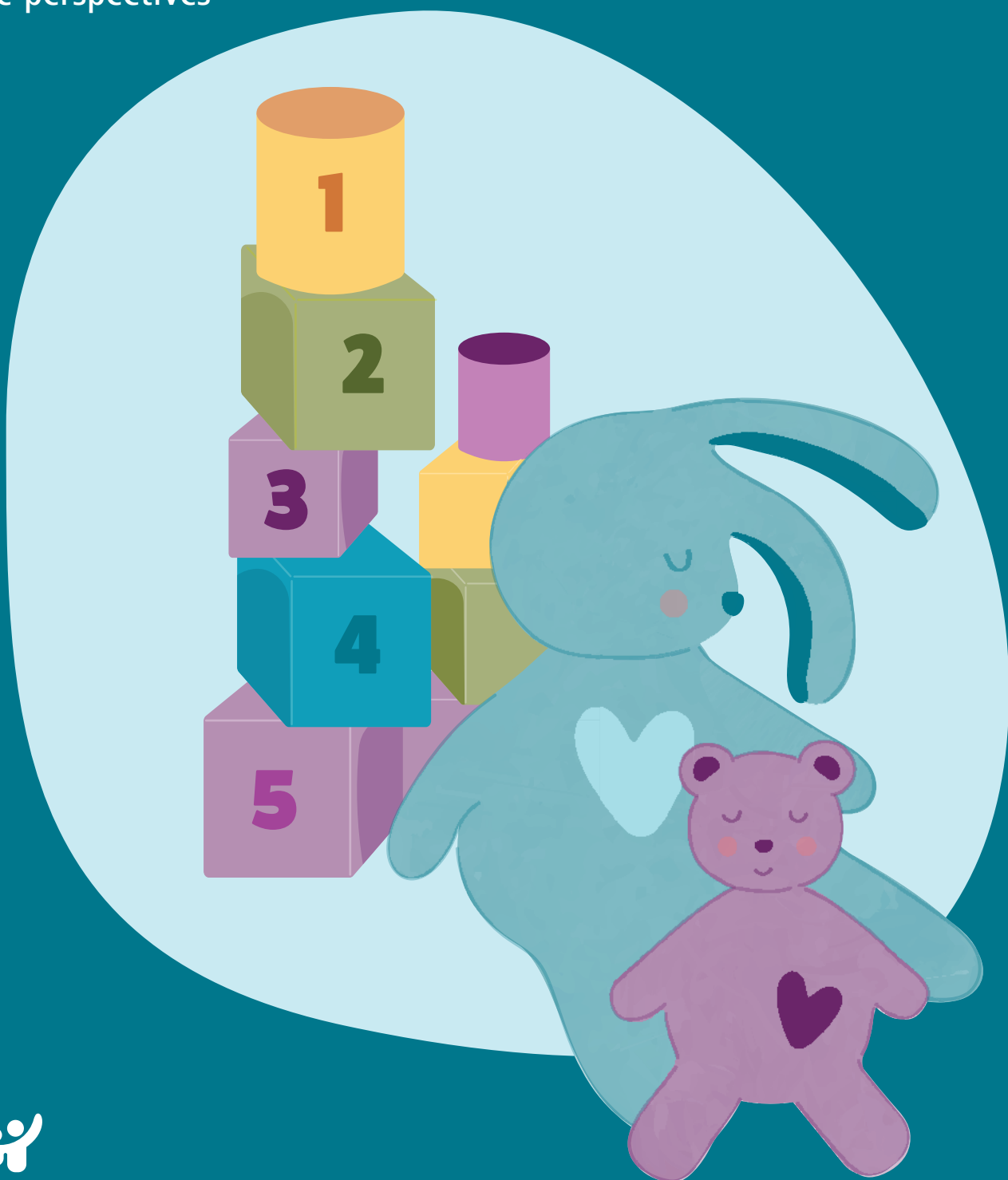


Participation of young children in early childhood education and care

Five perspectives



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1

Introduction

A child's first years lay the foundation for their lifelong journey. Bonds, trust and a sense of security are built in childhood. Early childhood education and care occupies a significant part of many children's early years and becomes an important part of their daily lives. It is when they build relationships with their peers, make meaningful contacts with adults, grow, develop and learn new skills.

The appropriate age to start early childhood education and care is regularly discussed by decision-makers, professionals in early childhood education and parents. On the one hand, the emphasis is on a parent's right to decide when their child is sufficiently mature to be enrolled in early childhood education and care, while on the other hand it is highlighted that early childhood education and care can equalise socio-economic disparities, and consequently it has even been proposed that early childhood education and care should be mandatory for all children over 3 years of age.

This publication examines the participation of children aged 2-3 in early childhood education and care. The age groups under consideration differ in that parents may be entitled to a child home care allowance for a 2-year-old child in home care as well as a municipal supplement in some municipalities. Parents may also be entitled to a flexible care allowance under certain conditions. The payment of both allowances ceases when the child reaches the age of 3. Public debate and various studies have highlighted the impact of child home care allowance on mothers, in particular, finding employment, and it has been suggested that the allowance be payable for a shorter period of time.

Various ideologies, interests and objectives have contributed to framing the debate on early childhood education and care for young children. It is, therefore, understandable that the topic evokes a wide range of emotions. Parents' decision-making is both facilitated and limited by prevailing attitudes, political power relations and the actual alternatives available to them.

This publication discusses the participation of young children in early childhood education and care from five perspectives. It does not intend to take a stand for or against early childhood education and care, but the purpose is to observe how variables, such as a child's first language, the region where they live and the way the early childhood education and care is administered, relate to the participation rate.

The results are discussed in the light of the current debate on early childhood education and care and the objectives of the Government Programme. The focus of the publication is ensuring that every child has the right to safe and high-quality early childhood education and care in their first years of life. The individual needs of each family must also be taken into account when considering a child's participation in early childhood education and care. If these angles are ignored, the debate will not comprehensively cover the topic. The debate must focus on the best interest of families and children, otherwise any efforts to increase the participation rate may be seen to serve other purposes.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE REPORT

This publication uses data by Statistics Finland on the participation of 2-4-year-old children in early childhood education and care. The data have been obtained from the Varda database. The base population is children aged 2-4 in Mainland Finland on 31 December 2021. In the data, children are divided into those who participated in early childhood education and care and those who did not.

The basic data include the age of the children in whole years (2, 3, 4), the area they live in (region, urban, semi-urban and rural municipalities, Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Turku, Tampere, Oulu) and their first language (Finnish, Swedish, other).

A child's participation in early childhood education and care is examined in the context of their family background. The variables are family type (nuclear family, reconstituted family, single parent, other), mother's (primarily) level of education (lower secondary, upper secondary, bachelor's or equivalent, master's or equivalent) and consumption unit-specific monetary income of the child's household-dwelling unit (income quintiles).

Participation is also examined in the context of how the early childhood education and care is administered (municipal, service voucher, purchased service, private day care allowance), its type (early childhood education and care centre, family day care) and the amount of time spent in early childhood education and care (full day, part day, shift care).

2

Overview

In 2021, 75% of Finnish children aged between 1 and 6 participated in early childhood education and care (ECEC). The figure was 69% for 2-year-olds and 83% for 3-year-olds. The regional differences in both age groups are significant (Figure 1). In 2021, the participation rate of 2-year-olds ranged from 54% in South Karelia to 75% in Pirkanmaa. The corresponding participation rates for 3-year-olds were 67% in South Karelia and 88% in Pirkanmaa. Participation rates increase with age, but the differences between the regions remain.

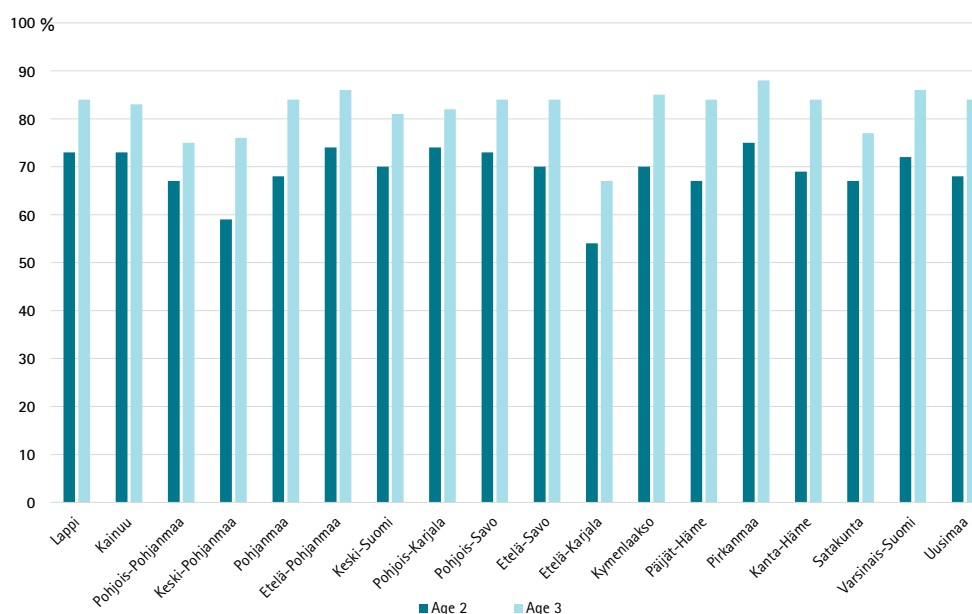
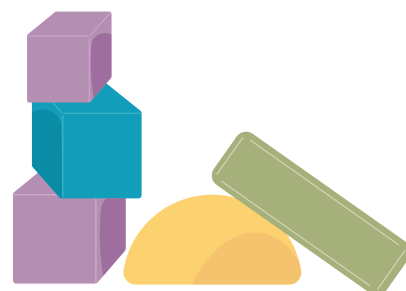


FIGURE 1.

2-3-year-olds who participated in early childhood education and care in 2021, % of children of the same age in the region.

The proportion of all 2-3-year-olds in early childhood education and care who were in family day care was 7%. The proportion of 2-year-olds participating in family day care is higher than that of 3-year-olds, but the difference is not significant in Mainland Finland. Regional differences, however, are significant (Figure 2). In some regions, family day care plays a greater role with regard to early childhood education and care. In Satakunta, for example, 20% of 2-year-olds in early childhood education and care are in family day care. Uusimaa is the region in which the fewest children aged 2 and 3 participate in family day care.



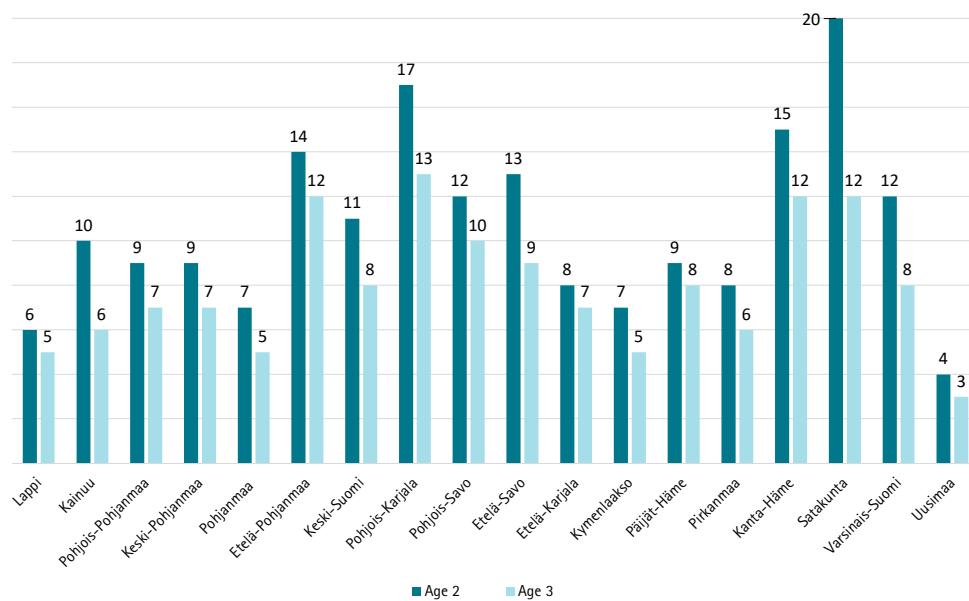


FIGURE 2.

Percentage of 2–3-year-olds in family day care by region, % of all children in early childhood education and care



3

Part-day early childhood education and care: an alternative system to support the reconciliation of work and family life

Although not always, part-day early childhood education and care is often related to parents' desire to better combine their work and family lives. The current government aims to promote greater reconciliation between work and family life. Part-day early childhood education and care allows working parents to have more free time, since the average time a child can spend in part-day care is a maximum of 30 hours a week. Under the Working Time Act, both parents have the right to take partial childcare leave simultaneously if they have been employed by the same employer for more than 6 of the previous 12 months.

The number of children in part-day early childhood education and care varies significantly between regions (Figure 3). In Central and South Ostrobothnia, as well as Ostrobothnia, 27% of 2-3-year-old children in early childhood education and care are in part-day care. The lowest proportion of children in part-day care is in Pirkanmaa (4%) and Päijät-Häme (3%). The prevalence of part-day early childhood education and care is not related to the participation rate. South Ostrobothnia, for example, has a high participation rate (80%). However, a significant number of children being enrolled in part-day care is not necessarily correlated with more children being enrolled in early childhood education and care, as can be seen in Central Ostrobothnia (68%).

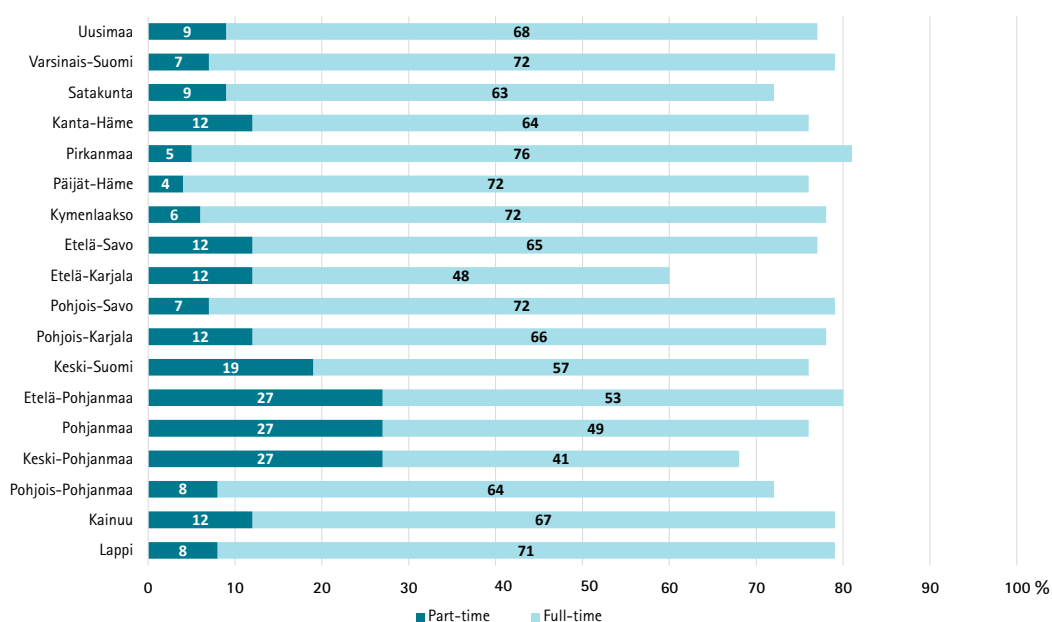


FIGURE 3.

2-3-year-olds in part-day and full-day early childhood education and care by region, %

The participation rates in part-day early childhood education and care are similar for 2- and 3-year-olds: for 2-year-olds it is 11% and for 3-year-olds it is 10% (Figure 4). The proportion remains the same for 4-year-olds. Families are entitled to flexible care allowance for children under the age of 3 if one or both parents reduce their working hours. In the light of these results, it

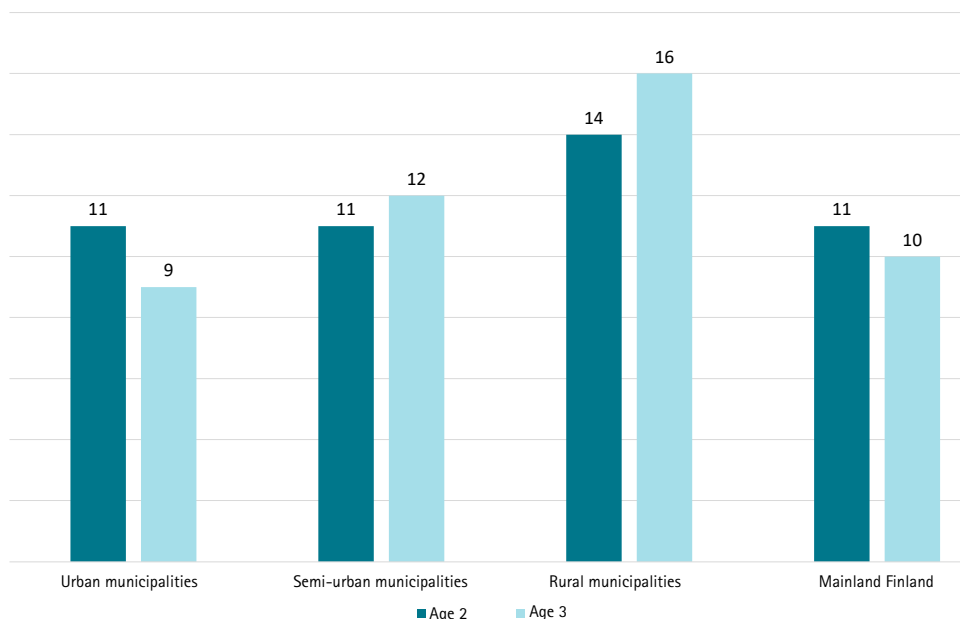


FIGURE 4.

Percentage of children in part-day early childhood education and care by municipality group in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care.

does not appear that the flexible care allowance is a significant factor in the choice between part-day or full-day care.

The statistics exclude open early childhood education and care provided by municipalities, which refers to activities such as clubs and activities in parks. The objectives of the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care must also be adhered to in such activities, so they must be well planned. These activities can be led by an ECEC teacher together with an early childhood educator, for example. Large cities, in particular, offer activities several days a week. Such activities offer small children the opportunity to build relationships with their peers and be involved in educational activities. Open early childhood education and care is often free or affordable and does not affect parents' entitlement to child home care allowance.

The situations in different municipalities should be taken into account when discussing part-day early childhood education and care. If an ECEC group has a large proportion of part-day children, it affects the group dynamics. In part-day care, the ratios of participants are determined differently to in full-day care. A large number of part-day children can significantly increase the size of a group, which can make planning of activities more challenging. If a municipality offers open early childhood education and care, families with little need for this type of care may also decide to involve their child. Access to open early childhood education and care is not a right, and it is not provided by all municipalities.

The Government Programme aims to increase the number of children over 3 years of age in early childhood education and care, but there is also a public debate concerning younger children. However, there is no unambiguous measure of the number of hours of early childhood education and care a child needs to benefit fully from such care. Parents need to be offered information about different types of part-day and open early childhood education and care.

The culture of full-time work that prevails in society may steer parents to make choices that do not take their child's or their family's needs into account. This may lead them to choose home care or full-day care even if this would otherwise not be the family's first choice. Employment structures need to become more family-friendly and mindful of children's rights so that parents can consider their family's needs when deciding on early childhood education and care.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

Families must have a real choice between full-day or part-day early childhood education and care. A culture should be created within workplaces that enables both parents to exercise their right to take partial child-care leave from work. It is important that case management services offer alternatives that support the individual needs of families and children. Not all municipalities have the same resources, which must be taken into account, and it is necessary to be aware of how the variation in the range of available services affects parents' ability to choose where their child should attend early childhood education and care.



4

Family background: a foundation for life, but a broader social perspective must also be considered with regard to participation

Finnish children live in many different types of families. Accordingly, while families may be collectively characterised, for example, as low-income, they are still likely to live in widely different circumstances. In this publication, children's participation in early childhood education and care is examined from the point of view of the family type and one parent's (primarily the mother's) education. Family background gives every child a unique foundation for life. This has also been taken into account in the Government Programme, which highlights the individual needs of families and how to meet them. Early childhood education and care is part of the support system offered to children and families, which studies have also shown to have an equalising effect on the socio-economic disparities between families.

Children aged 2 and 3 in single-parent families are as likely to participate in early childhood education and care as children of the same age in two-parent families. Children aged 2 in single-parent families are slightly less likely (67%) to participate in early childhood education and care than children of the same age in two-parent families (70%). Three-year-old children in single-parent families are more likely (85%) to participate in early childhood education and care than those in two-parent families (83%) when the participation rate is compared across Mainland Finland. When analysed by region (Figure 5), it is only in Uusimaa and Pirkanmaa where children aged 2–3 in two-parent families are more likely to participate in early childhood education and care than children in single-parent families.

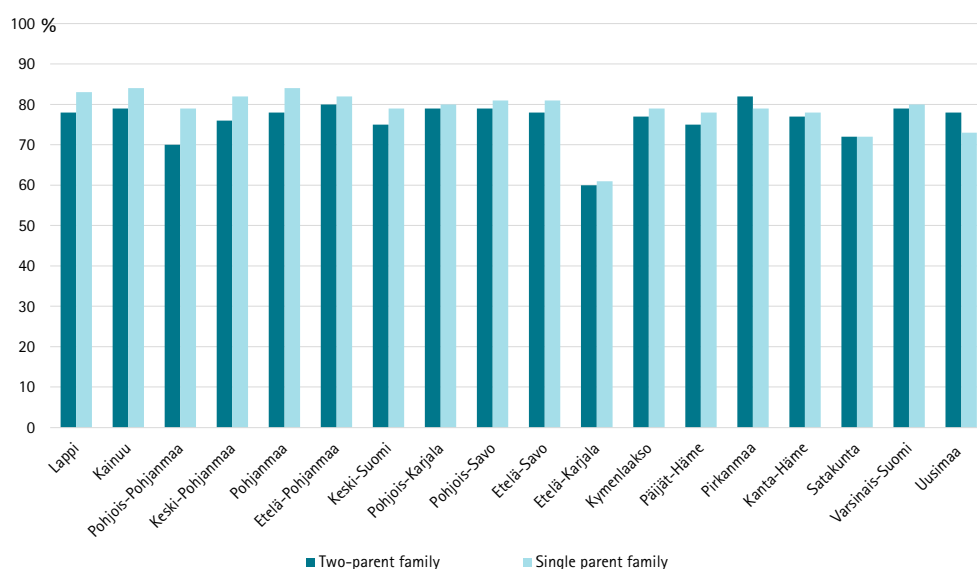


FIGURE 5.

Participation of 2–3-year-olds from two- and single-parent families in early childhood education and care by region, % of all children in early childhood education and care

Children whose parents have only attained lower secondary education are less likely to participate in early childhood education and care than those whose parents have higher education. Participation in early childhood education

and care is most common among children who have a parent with a master's degree or equivalent education. The higher a parent's level of education, the more likely their child is to participate in early childhood education and care. In rural municipalities, the differences in parents' education are smaller than in other types of municipalities (Figure 6). At the regional level, the difference between the lowest and highest levels of education varies. In some regions, the difference in participation in early childhood education and care by children with parents with the lowest and the highest levels of education is just a few percentage points.

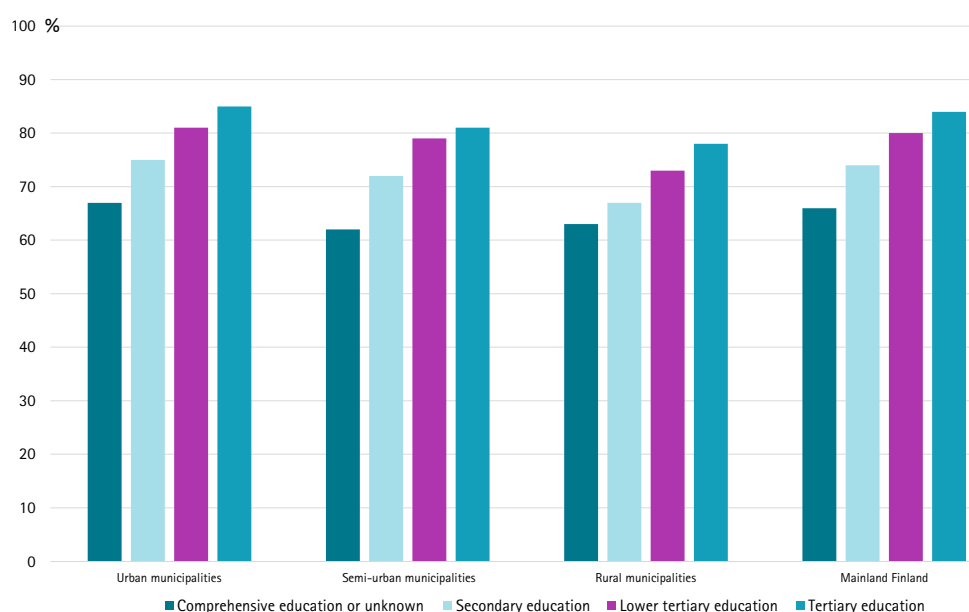


FIGURE 6.

2-3-year-olds participating in early childhood education and care by their parent's (primarily the mother's) level of education by municipality group in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

Changes have been made to the income limits for early childhood education and care fees in recent years. These were most significant between 2021 and 2023, when the lowest income limits were increased by a third. As of 2023, approximately half of children in early childhood education and care do not pay fees. Some municipalities have also decided to offer all children free early childhood education and care. This publication does not examine participation from the perspective of family income. After the income limits were increased in 2023, fees are unlikely to be a barrier to participation in early childhood education and care for low-income families as it is likely to either be free or affordable.

When parents make decisions on their child's participation in early childhood education and care, factors other than those related to the care itself or the child's age may affect their decisions. If a parent does not have a job to return to after family leave, caring for their child at home may feel more socially acceptable to them than being unemployed. Therefore, a child's participation in early childhood education and care does not only depend on the parents' decisions but may also be linked to overall labour market and education policies.

It is important for the case management services for early childhood education and care to consider families' actual needs. Equality and fairness should not mean that everyone gets the same as everyone else, rather that everyone gets what they need. A single-parent family without a car has different needs for an ECEC unit than a two-parent family with a car. Services must be accessible for everyone for them to be fair. If they are not, some children may even be prevented from participating in early childhood education and care altogether.

The benefits of early childhood education and care for children in low-income families with low levels of education/older children are often highlighted. Even in such cases it is important to examine the child's family. Participation should also not be viewed in a simplistic manner. Even if a child does not participate in early childhood education and care, they can be involved in playground activities, clubs and other forms of open early childhood education and care activities. The service system should seek to identify the children who would most benefit from early childhood education and care, and not make assumptions on the basis of their families' socio-economic status. The service provided must also be viewed critically. All parents, regardless of their income and education, should have an equal right to high-quality early childhood education and care for their child.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

Early childhood education and care must take into account the different needs of children and families. The focus must be on the child's best interest. Families and children must be valued, and families must be allowed to make choices on the basis of their needs, keeping the best interest of their child in mind. The social aspect must also be taken into account, i.e. focus needs to be on education and labour market policies. Different forms of participation need be considered. It is important to reach families whose children benefit from early childhood education and care through other services.



5

Foreign-language speakers: early childhood education and care that genuinely respects and promotes diversity, so those from different backgrounds can feel that early childhood education and care services are suitable for their children

According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, every child must be helped to develop their capacity to understand and respect other people's cultural, linguistic, ideological and religious backgrounds. Early childhood education and care recognises and acknowledges people's differences. The Government Programme states that special measures will be targeted at raising the participation rate of children with immigrant backgrounds in early childhood education and care, the aim of which is to improve their Finnish and Swedish language skills and their integration into Finnish society. Participation of the child in early childhood education is seen in the Government Programme as promoting the integration of the whole family.

In 2021, the share of foreign-language speakers of the total population in Finland was 8.3%. The proportion of foreign-language speakers in the 2- and 3-year-old age groups was 12.1%.

The language groups discussed in this publication are Finnish, Swedish and other. This means that those who speak Sámi as their first language and those who use Finnish sign language as their native language are in the category 'other'.

This definition is not entirely without its problems. For example, about a fifth of Sámi speakers register Sámi as their first language, while the first language of a child with an immigrant background may be Finnish. The shares in the background material used in this publication are similar in size to those in comparable materials. The language group 'other' therefore covers a large proportion of the children with an immigrant background.

The difference in the participation rate between foreign-language-speaking children and children who speak either of the national languages is about 10 percentage points for 2-year-olds (Figure 7). There is less difference in

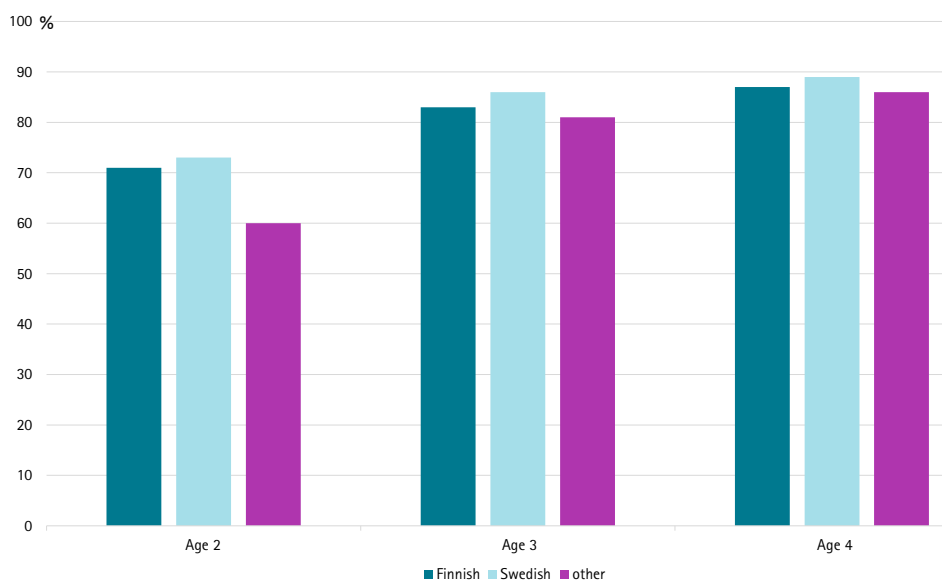
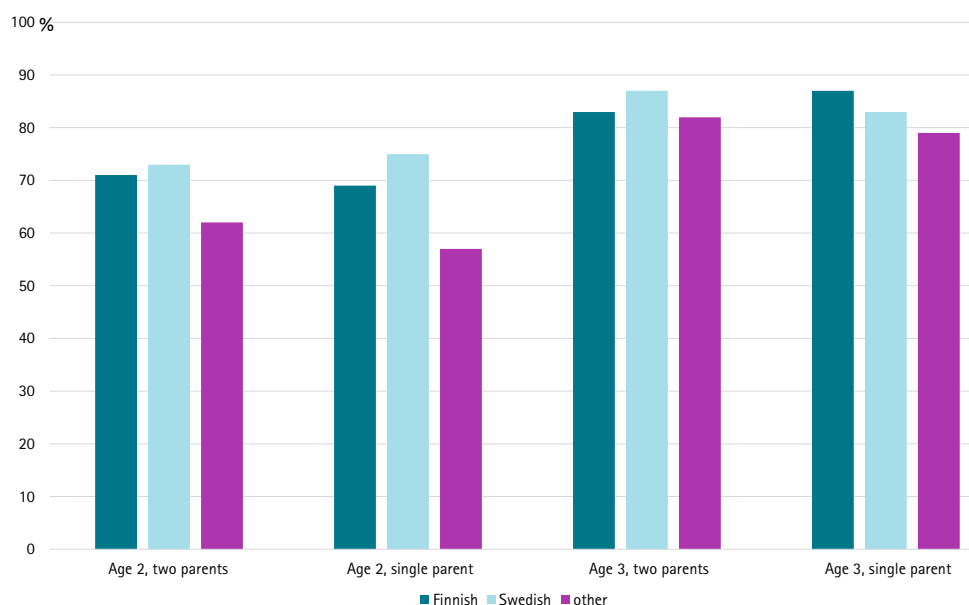


FIGURE 7.

Participation in early childhood education and care by language in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

the participation rate of 3-year-olds and practically none in the participation rate of 4-year-olds in early childhood education and care. The region-specific participation rates for 2-year-olds generally vary in all language groups. For 3-year-olds, the situation is more even in both Mainland Finland and the regions, also among foreign-language speakers.

The participation of foreign-language-speaking children in early childhood education and care has been examined according to a parent's education and family type. In some regions, the number of children in early childhood education and care is small, and, consequently, no data are available. Two-year-old children from foreign-language speaking families participate less



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Participation in early childhood education and care by family background and language in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

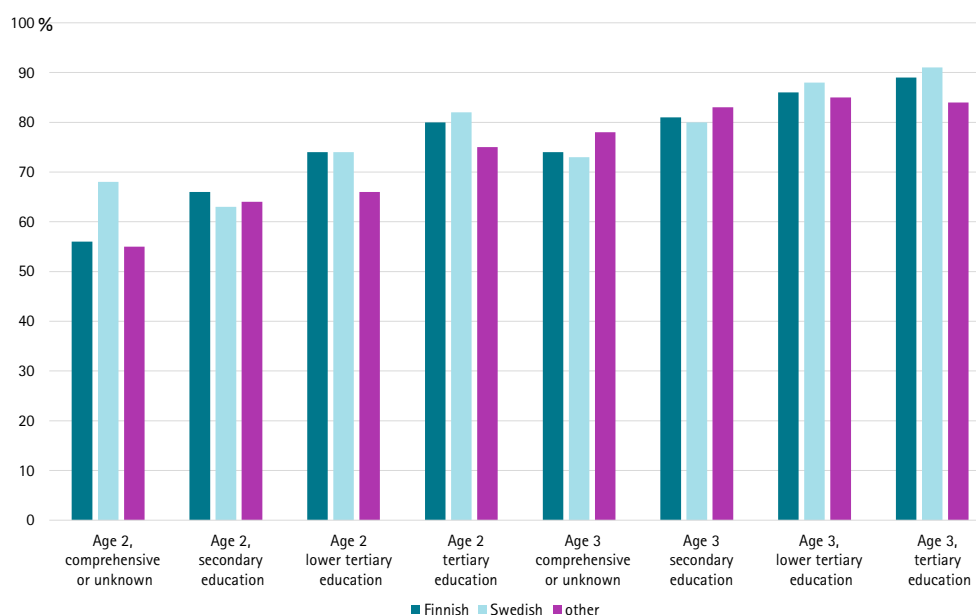


FIGURE 9.

2-3-year-olds participating in early childhood education and care by language and by their parent's (primarily the mother's) level of education in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

in early childhood education and care than children of the same age who speak either of the national languages in both single- and two-parent families (Figure 8). However, the difference is no longer as great among 3-year-old children in single-parent families, and the participation rate of children from foreign-language speaking two-parent families is similar to that of children from families that speak either of the national languages.

Using education as a variable, there is more variation in the participation rate of both 2- and 3-year-olds (Figure 9). Children of foreign-language-speaking parents with a higher education attend early childhood education and care less than children with national language backgrounds, but this difference narrows among the 3-year-olds. In some groups, foreign-language-speaking children's participation in early childhood education and care is more common than that of children who speak Finnish or Swedish.

Foreign-language speakers are a heterogeneous group that may have nothing in common other than the fact that they speak a foreign language. Children's parents or grandparents have immigrated to Finland for a variety of reasons, such as being refugees, studying, working or needing temporary protection. Moving to Finland may have been a considered decision with a positive outcome or a forced transition involving traumatic experiences.

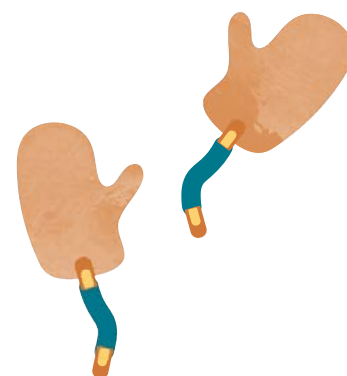
We need information about the causes and backgrounds of immigration, as well as an understanding of the importance of language and culture in the building of a child's identity. Families must be able to feel that their child's background is valued. It is also necessary to be aware of how a family's cultural perceptions of issues such as good parenting determine their decision between early childhood education and care, and home care.

Case management services must take into account families' diverse needs. Open early childhood education and care services may be sufficient if a child's other needs are met and their parent mainly wants to take care of their child at home. Play club activities that take place two or three times a week, for example, offer an opportunity for a small child to experience participation in early childhood education and care.

Information about the services and their benefits for children's growth and development must be made available so that parents can have their children attend open early childhood education and care. Case management services must also inform parents that the services may be free of charge and that they do not affect allowances paid to families. Guides and instructions related to the services should be produced in languages spoken by linguistic minorities that live in Finland. Parents and early childhood education and care operators could collaborate on this issue.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

Case management services can increase families' knowledge of different forms of early childhood education and care, as well as their cost-free nature and impact on families' income. Advice should be provided in a language that the families understand. It is important that guidance is given in a manner that is respectful of the families and their backgrounds. The various cultural points that may influence families' decisions need to be taken into account. Cooperation and parental involvement need to be emphasised. ECEC staff need to be given additional training on the diversity of families and the impact of their culture on the development of their children.



6

Mode of organising early childhood education and care: all children must have the right to high-quality and stable ECEC services, regardless of the service provider

It is the municipality's responsibility to provide ECEC services to its residents as required. In addition to municipalities, other service providers may also offer ECEC services.

The practices of organising early childhood education and care services vary between municipalities. The municipality may offer a service voucher that parents use to pay for the ECEC service. For families, there is no financial difference whether they choose early childhood education and care provided as an outsourced service, i.e. purchased by the municipality, or the service provider is the municipality. The level of private childcare allowance is determined by family income, the municipality of residence, the age of the child and the form of early childhood education and care. The current Government Programme highlights the importance of freedom of choice in early childhood education and care services. The objective of the Government Programme is to increase the use of private childcare allowance to the level of 2011 and to reform the service voucher system. The reforms aim to increase the freedom of choice for all families in a more equitable way.

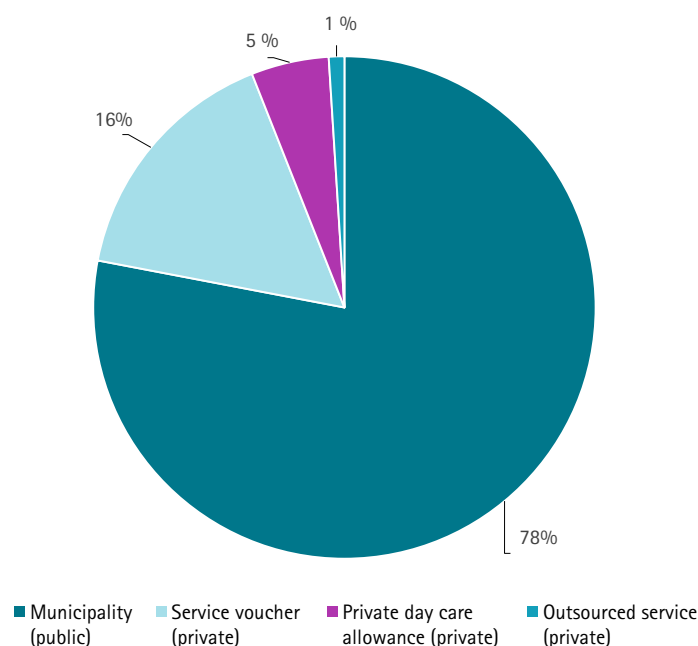


FIGURE 10.

2-3-year-olds participating in early childhood education and care by mode of organising ECEC services in Mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

Of the 2-3-year-olds participating in early childhood education and care, 78% are in publicly organised early childhood education and care in Mainland Finland (Figure 10). The proportion of early childhood education and care services purchased by a municipality is marginal in all categories of municipalities (Figure 11). The use of the service voucher varies by region: in semi-urban municipalities, almost 20% of all children in early childhood education and care received a service voucher, whereas in rural municipalities, 6% of all families whose 2-3-year-old children were in early childhood

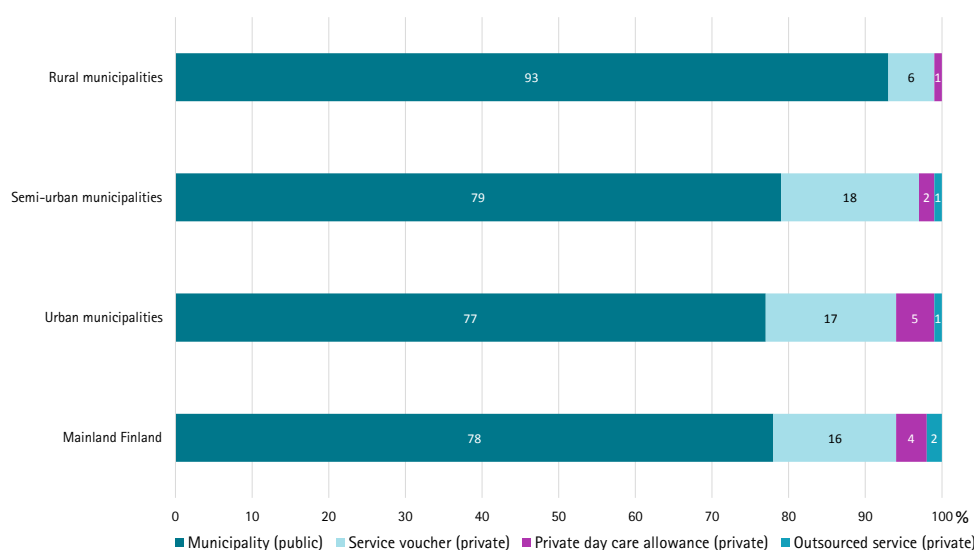


FIGURE 11.

Organisation of early childhood education and care services for 2-3-year-olds by municipality group in mainland Finland, % of all children in early childhood education and care

education and care used the service voucher. Private childcare allowance is most commonly used in urban municipalities, although even there the proportion is small, approximately 5% of those participating in early childhood education and care. In addition to paying for care in early childhood education, care centres and family daycare, private childcare allowance can be used for hiring a childminder to care for a child at home, for example.

The income limits for fees in municipal early childhood education and care have been raised in recent years. This means that early childhood education and care is free or very affordable for many families.

However, a service voucher or private childcare allowance provided by the municipality may mean that middle-income and low-income earners pay a higher excess than they would if they were using a publicly provided service. The level of private childcare allowance depends on the actual allowance as well as the municipal supplement paid by some municipalities. This level can be a decisive factor when families choose an ECEC provider for their child.

Not all municipalities offer service vouchers. In such a situation, a family has fewer options in terms of a service provider that is suitable for its needs. Those who have the financial means are, actually, best able to choose the type of early childhood education and care, while families with the lowest income have fewer alternatives.

Privatisation of early childhood education and care services can lead to increasing inequality between children. If a private service provider can choose its customers, where does that leave children in need of special support?

If a child's need for special support affects the family's ability to choose the place of care for the child, the family does not have the same actual options as other families. This is especially problematic if a municipality offers numerous private sector services. Situations such as this also jeopardise the best interests and rights of the child. The support that a child needs must be offered to the child regardless of the service provider. Alternatively, a municipality itself should provide sufficient ECEC services, so that families with a child in need of special support also have access to high-quality services.

More than a fifth of early childhood education and care services are offered by private sector providers. However, the municipality responsible for organising the services must be able to guarantee ECEC services as a subjective right in all circumstances. If, for example, changes are made to the private childcare allowance through political decisions, the terms of use of service vouchers are amended or a service provider goes bankrupt, the municipality must organise the service for families itself if families are not able to continue to have their children with a private sector provider for reasons such as increased costs.

Children have the right to high-quality ECEC services in all circumstances. Unexpected changes in the status of ECEC providers or allowances related to early childhood education and care can lead to overloading of public sector providers and excessively big groups.

Anticipation and the provision of ECEC services by municipalities also give families security in changing situations and offer a better guarantee that different types of families have access to an early childhood education and care service that is suitable for their child.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

In order to ensure freedom of choice, attention must be paid to the obtainability of service vouchers and private childcare allowance, especially for those on low incomes. Children in need of special support must have access to an early childhood education and care unit of their families' choice. Children must also receive the support that they require in private sector ECEC units. Adequate municipal services ensure that all children receive high-quality services even in changing circumstances.



7

Shift care: high-quality, accessible and educational ECEC services for all children regardless of time and place

Under the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018), municipalities are obliged to organise early childhood education and care of the scope and types of activity that meet the needs in the municipalities. This also covers shift care. Shift care is early childhood education and care offered in the evenings, at weekends and on public holidays. In the international context, Finland's way of organising shift service as a public service is exceptional.

Approximately 5% of 2-3-year-olds in early childhood education and care use the shift care service. The proportion of children participating in shift care varies between regions (Figure 12). The highest participation rate can be found in Kainuu (15%) and the lowest in Uusimaa (3%). In four regions, the proportion of 2-3-year-olds in shift care among all children of the same age in early childhood education and care is 10% or more. The number of units that provide shift care is not recorded, but their number varies between municipalities. In small towns, shift care is often provided by just one early childhood education and care centre. Commutes to the early childhood education and care centre can be long. Some ECEC units organise shift care by having children in groups, in which all the children are in shift care, while some units provide shift care as needed, and the workers' rotas are planned accordingly. This means that the circumstances in which early childhood education and care is provided vary.

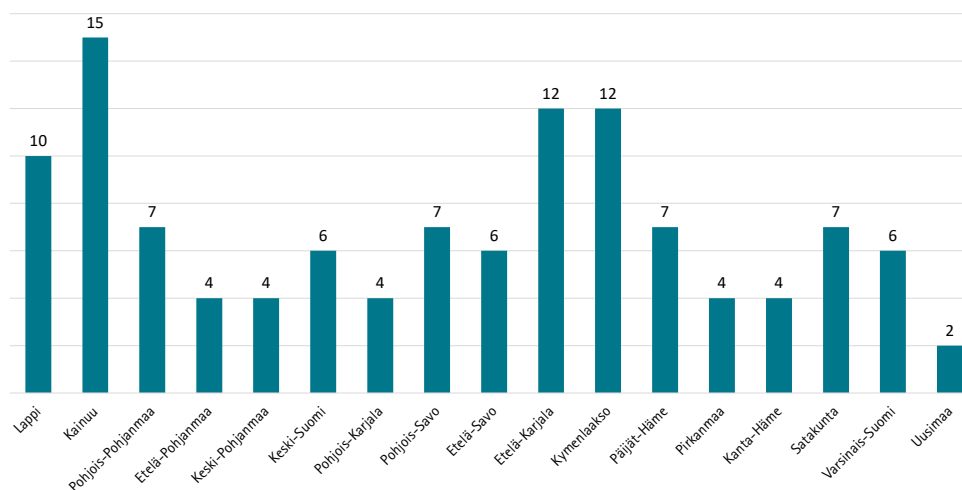


FIGURE 12.

2-3-year-olds in shift care by region, % of all children in early childhood education and care

The number of children in shift care varies to some extent according to Statistics Finland's grouping of municipalities (Figure 13). Participation is lowest in urban municipalities (4%) and highest in rural ones (8%). Of all children participating in shift care, 45% live in the regions in which the large cities are located. Of all children across Finland who participate in shift care, 19% live in these cities (Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo, Tampere, Turku and Oulu). Shift care is, thus, most common in large cities. Due to the large number of children living in these cities, they are able to provide more shift care than sparsely populated areas can.

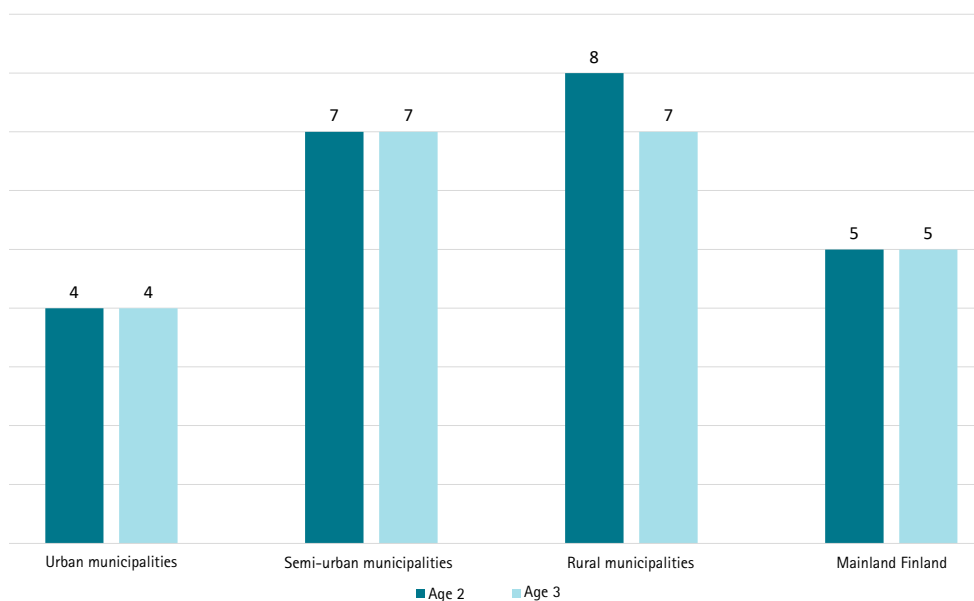


FIGURE 13.

2-3-year-olds in shift care by municipality group, % of all children in early childhood education and care

Of the children in ECEC shift care, 1.7% attend services in facilities other than early childhood education and care centres. In practice, this means that 33 children participate in shift care in family day care. It may be difficult to coordinate the working hours of a family day care childminder with shift care if there are other children in the group, which is why family day care is often excluded as an option for a child in need of shift care.

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care does not define the concept of shift care in any detail. It is said to be a form of early childhood education and care that is provided outside normal working hours. The National core curriculum for ECEC criteria (2022) also does not determine the special features of shift care. Municipalities are obliged to arrange shift care if necessary, but the way in which it is arranged is not regulated. ECEC centres that have more staff on all shifts and a large number of children are in a better position to organise such services. If there are few children in need of shift care, the care may be casual, less structured and depend more on the decisions made by the ECEC educator.

At its best, shift care allows a child to be heard and strengthens their inclusion. There may be fewer children in the evenings and at weekends, which gives the adult time and opportunity to treat them as individuals. However, the fact that there may be different people who provide care, unpredictability, and schedules that may not suit the child's needs can put a strain on the child, who may show this by crying or being unwilling to take part in activities, for example. A child's right to have access to age-appropriate educational activities is not always realised according to the child's best interests if one ECEC educator is responsible for the care of several children of different ages.

It may be difficult for a parent who works shifts to reconcile work and family life if high-quality shift care that meets the family's needs is not available. This is especially true in single-parent families, in which one adult manages work and child care responsibilities.

A long commute between home, the ECEC unit and the workplace means long days for the child. Unlike children who attend early childhood education and care during 'office hours', the law does not determine the length of day for children in shift care. For this reason, the length of the day may sometimes be determined by the schedule of the ECEC unit (e.g. meals and periods of rest) and not by the individual needs of the child and their family.

KEY POINTS OF THE CHAPTER

An ECEC provider must offer shift care if a parent says that their child needs it. Although the need for shift care is rare, it is important in that it allows families to organise their day-to-day activities. National guidelines should be introduced for shift care services to guarantee consistent, educational and accessible ECEC services for all children that take the child's best interests into account. This would mean that a child's access to shift care would not depend on the municipality where they live or the ECEC unit.



8

Conclusions

There are great differences between regions in terms of participation in early childhood education and care, which is why it is important to examine the availability of the services offered by municipalities, the resources of which vary.

For families to be able to make decisions on the basis of their circumstances and their child's best interests, municipalities need to offer early childhood education and care that meets a variety of needs. All families regardless of their income level must be given freedom of choice. Since there is no absolute understanding or truth about the amount of early childhood education and care that is sufficient, part-day and full-day care must not be ranked against each other. If the goal is to encourage children to participate in early childhood education and care and to safeguard their best interests, full-day care is not automatically the best way for them to benefit from the care. Families also need to be made aware of the open ECEC service as an alternative way to organise their childcare. It is also necessary to keep in mind that families have different needs and circumstances. Once the needs and wishes of families are identified, their options can be discussed. Despite the different capacities of municipalities, all children have the right to high-quality ECEC services.

The right to high-quality ECEC services organised with children's best interests in mind requires additional investments in quality. This is the only way that children can be offered safe and educational care and relationships that are as permanent as possible. They have a voice and their participation is strengthened.

There needs to be more public debate about the quality of early childhood education and care. The abstract concept of quality must be made concrete. What do we provide when our operations are of high quality? The National Child Strategy and the Government Programme both refer to a genuinely child-friendly Finland, and this concept needs to be incorporated into everything from grassroot-level early childhood education and care to all policies. Improvements in the quality of early childhood education and care are not sufficient if employment structures do not support the reconciliation of work and family life. Ultimately, all politics is child politics, because all political decisions have at least an indirect impact on children.

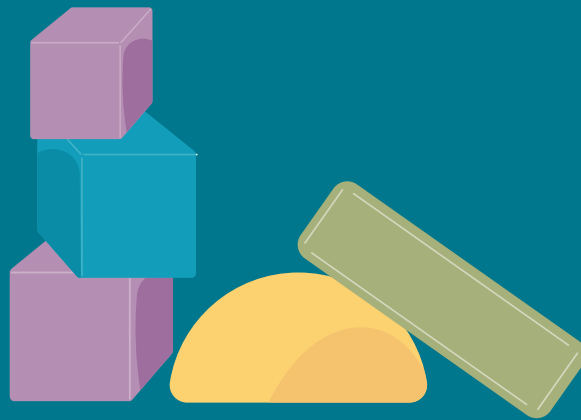
There are many factors behind seemingly personal decisions, such as social attitudes, the services available in a given municipality, and the actual options available to families. Although public debate often focuses on parents' decision to put their child into a certain type of early childhood education and care at a certain age, the issue should be examined from a wider perspective. When the focus is on the quality of early childhood education and care, every family can make decisions concerning participation in early childhood education and care on the basis of their circumstances, and, above all, with the view of the child's best interests and rights.

Simply investing in quality is not enough. A child-friendly society makes it easier for every child to take their first steps in life, and family-friendly attitudes in workplaces make it easier for parents to balance parenting and work demands. More effort is needed to ensure that society takes children's best interests into account in politics, structures and day-to-day encounters. Every child's life is important in itself, which is why investing in children's early years pays off. It is an investment in the future, but, above all, an investment in the present, children's well-being, inclusion and their rights. An investment in life.



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