

## **The Swedish Welfare System**

### **Family policy**

Child care services have become part of the Swedish welfare system and of the everyday lives of most families. Well organised child care services are absolutely essential to meet the changes that have taken place in family patterns and the roles of the sexes since the 1970s. The proportion of women in working life has steadily increased and most children in Sweden grow up these days with parents who share responsibility for supporting the family. Child care has been a priority issue in Sweden for almost three decades and reform in the sector has enjoyed the support of the Riksdag. The goal has been to offer child care services of high quality and access to places at child care centres for all who need them. The municipalities are responsible for running child care services which are financed by the community.

Family policies promote opportunities for both parents to combine their work with joint responsibility for their children. Legislation in the field of gender equality aims at creating equal conditions for men and women, both as regards pay and career opportunities.

In 1985 the Riksdag took a decision that all children from the age of 18 months and up to school age should have access to a place in the pre-school programme by 1991 at the latest. During this period the birth rate increased rapidly at the same time as the number of women working in a profession grew and the goal could not be reached. Legislation was therefore tightened in 1995 and the municipalities became liable to provide pre-school programmes and leisure-time activities for schoolchildren without unreasonable delay. The liability applies to children from age one up to and including twelve years whose parents are gainfully employed or study. This tightening of the law combined with the high birth-rate led to the creation of a record number of new places in the child care services in the mid-1990s. At present there are sufficient places to meet demand in most municipalities.

Childbirth rates are currently low in Sweden. Now that the economy has improved after the crisis years in the early 1990s, substantial amounts are being invested in family policies in the form of, for example, increased child allowance, extended parental insurance and lower charges in the child care services. Child allowance is one of the foundations of general welfare and the Government's objective is that child allowances should level out costs between those who have children and those who do not. As of 1 January 2001, child allowance is SEK 950 per child and month. In addition to this, there is supplementary child allowance.

Parental insurance means that parents receive 80 per cent of their income for 360 days and, in addition to that, they are entitled to an additional 90 days parental leave with SEK 60 per day guaranteed. Almost all fathers in Sweden take parental leave in connection with the birth of a baby. Furthermore, both mothers and fathers stay at home from work to take care of a child that is ill.