

Fact Sheets on Sweden

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Childcare in Sweden

Swedish childcare has twin aims. One is to support and encourage children's development and learning, and help them get a good start in life, while the other is to enable parents to combine parenthood with employment or studies.

This dual approach was officially introduced back in the early 1970s with the launching of an extensive development programme for Swedish childcare. Along with the parental insurance and child benefit systems, childcare has been one of the mainstays of Swedish family welfare policy while at the same time having an explicitly educational orientation. In the 1990s there was increasing emphasis on the educational policy aspects and in 1996 responsibility for public childcare was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Science.

Today, public childcare is a natural part of everyday life for the great majority of Swedish families. The lack of openings and the long queues that presented considerable problems in the 1990s have largely disappeared. A public childcare system marked by low fees and a high level of legitimacy, quality and accessibility is now an integral feature of Sweden's welfare society.

For more than three decades, childcare has been a priority issue for the country's public authorities. Reforms in this field have received growing parliamentary support and this has allowed successive governments to implement the policies originally drawn up in the early 1970s. The aim has been to provide quality childcare, with full access for those requiring it, run principally by local authorities and financed out of the public purse. The main incentives have been consideration for the well-being of the young and a desire for greater equality between the sexes.

The development of public childcare

The roots of the Swedish childcare system can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. The first infant crèche (*barnkrubba*) was opened in 1854 for the children of single mothers obliged to work for a living. Work shelters (*arbetsstuga*), which appeared at roughly the same time, took in schoolchildren from poor families and sought to instil in them the values of duty and diligence besides teaching them some rudimentary handicrafts. Both the crèche and the work shelter were social institutions usually run by private citizens or by charities. They were soon joined by the kindergarten (*barnträdgård*), based on the ideas of German educator Friedrich Fröbel. Kindertgartens had purely educational aims and were attended mainly by the children of well-to-do families where the mothers did not go out to work.

In the 1930s and 1940s the public authorities began to assume greater responsibility for the care and training of young children, and the stigma of poverty was removed. The crèches were increasingly brought under municipal auspices and renamed day nurseries or daycare centres (*daghem*), while the work shelters became leisure-time centres (*fritidshem*). The centres however were mainly to be found in the cities and attracted relatively small numbers of children, whereas attendance at kindertgartens or playschools (*lek-skola*) was more widespread.

During the 1960s demand for female labour increased and there were growing calls for a major expansion of childcare facilities. In 1968 the government of the day appointed a special commission, the National Commission on Childcare (*Barnstugeutredningen*), which was to draw up proposals for a childcare system capable of meeting social, educational and supervisory needs in Sweden.

The 1968 National Commission decisively influenced the future direction of Swedish childcare. Its report formulated important educational principles and ideas that had a considerable impact on policy and still apply today. Among other things it laid the foundations for the Swedish pre-school model—daycare centres and playschools were to be combined in a pre-school (*förskola*) system that would serve the interests of children as well as allowing parents to work. Care and education were to go hand in hand. The report also dealt with the issue of school-age daycare and proposed rapid development of the country's leisure-time centres.

Despite rapid progress in the 1970s and 1980s local authorities were unable to expand facilities to such an extent that the waiting list for places disappeared. As a result, tougher legislation was introduced in 1995 under which local authorities became duty bound to provide childcare without undue delay to families in which the parents were either working or studying.

This rule together with the high birthrate in Sweden led to a record number of new childcare openings. Queues shortened and today the number of places largely conforms to needs. Without such a highly developed childcare system, the changes in family patterns and gender roles that have occurred since the 1970s would not have been possible. The proportion of women in the labour force has steadily approached that of men, and most children in Sweden today grow up with parents who share responsibility for supporting the family.

The reforms of 2001–2003

During the period 2001–2003, a number of reforms were introduced with the aim of improving access to childcare for groups that had previously lacked it. Local authorities were required to provide pre-school or family daycare (*familjedaghem*) openings to children aged 1–5 even when the parents were unemployed or taking parental leave to look after a sibling. Children in this group are entitled to such care for at least three hours a day. Pre-school care free of charge was introduced for all children aged 14–5 for at least three hours a day during the school term (universal pre-school). A further step was the introduction of a maximum fee, i.e. a ceiling on the amount parents were required to pay for public childcare at a pre-school, a family daycare facility or a leisure-time centre.

The aim of these reforms is to make public childcare a part of the general welfare system, available to all. The basic principle is that all children in Sweden shall have access to childcare and that fees shall be so low that no child is excluded.

Part of lifelong learning

The introduction of childcare into the educational system in 1996 served to emphasise the importance of children's formative years for the learning process in later life. All educational activities for children and young people are part of a lifelong learning process and should be viewed as a whole. The aim is for all activities to be informed by a common approach to child development and learning.

In 1998, a new school form was introduced, the pre-school class (*förskoleklass*) for six-year-olds. Such classes are voluntary but are attended by virtually all six-year-olds who have not started compulsory school. Pre-school classes, leisure-time centres and compulsory school work closely with one another, thus bringing together different

Pre-schools care for children whose parents are working or studying, unemployed or on parental leave, and also take in children with special needs of their own. In addition, all children aged 4-5 are entitled to 525 hours of free attendance a year.

Pre-schools are open all year round and daily opening times are varied to fit in with parents' working hours/study schedules. Children are generally divided into groups of between 15 and 20. As a rule, three members of staff—pre-school teachers and daycare attendants—are allocated to each group. The average pre-school comprises three such groups.

In the autumn of 2003, some 75 % of all children aged 1-5 attended pre-school, or 352,000 children in all.

Family daycare involves municipal childminders providing care in their own homes while the parents are working or studying. Children from families where the parents are unemployed or on parental leave are also entitled to this form of care. Opening hours are varied to fit in with parents' working hours/study schedules. Family daycare is an alternative to pre-school, for instance in cases where children live far from the nearest pre-school. This alternative is more common in rural areas and in small towns than in metropolitan areas.

The number of children in family daycare has steadily declined since the late 1980s. In the autumn of 2003, about 7% of all children aged 1-5 and 1% of children in the 6-9 age group were attending a family daycare facility, or some 40,000 children in all.

Open pre-schools are for the children of parents who are at home during the day. Children attend with their parents. In some housing areas, open pre-schools have an explicitly social function and collaborate with public bodies like the municipal social services and/or the maternity care and child healthcare services. Most open pre-schools are free of charge. In the autumn of 2003 there were about 550 such pre-schools in Sweden.

Leisure-time centres provide care for children whose parents are working or studying during the time the child is not at school, i.e. early mornings, late afternoons and holiday time. Most of the children who attend are aged 6-9. Leisure-time centres are open all year round and daily opening hours are varied to fit in with parents' working hours/study schedules. In the autumn of 2003, some 74 % of all children aged 6-9 and 10% of those aged 10-12 were attending a leisure-time centre, or 342,000 children in all.

Leisure-time centres are intended as a supplement to schooling and are supposed to help children in their development and provide them with meaningful recreation. Present policy is to bring schools and leisure-time centres closer together, and today most collaborate to some degree.

Open leisure-time activities are described in the Education Act as an alternative to leisure-time centres and family daycare for children aged 10-12. Such facilities however are only available in about a quarter of Sweden's municipal areas. Around 5% of all children aged 10-12 take part in open leisure-time activities.

educational traditions and allowing new ideas about learning and working methods to develop.

As part of the process of integrating childcare and schooling, pre-schools have been given a national curriculum of their own while the curriculum for compulsory schools has been adapted to encompass pre-schools and also to some extent leisure-time centres as well. The two curricula are basically constructed in the same way. They interlock and reflect the same approach to development and learning. They also share the same democratic values. These two curricula along with the curriculum for voluntary forms of schooling cover the first twenty years of life in the Swedish educational system.

Evaluations of the transfer of responsibility for public childcare to the educational sector indicate both favourable and less favourable results. The new rules have been widely applied and received the backing of both professionals and parents. But the approach adopted to pre-school children has caused certain problems. Often, the working methods and approaches found in schools have dominated, and there is a danger of the care provided at both pre-school and leisure-time centres becoming 'schoolified' in a way that was not intended.

Childcare today – forms and range

The various forms of public childcare in Sweden today are available to children aged 1-12. Children who have yet to start school can attend pre-school activities (*förskoleverksamhet*), while schoolchildren have access to school-age childcare (*skolbarnomsorg*) outside school hours. In Sweden, compulsory school begins at the age of seven but almost all six-year-olds attend voluntary pre-school classes. This means in principle that pre-school care encompasses children aged 1-5 and school-age childcare those aged 6-12.

Under the Education Act, pre-schooling is provided at pre-schools (*förskola*), in family daycare facilities (*familjedaghem*) and at open pre-schools (*öppen förskola*) while school-age childcare is provided at leisure-time centres (*fritidshem*), in family daycare facilities (*familjedaghem*) and at open leisure-time centres (*öppen fritidsverksamhet*).

Local authorities provide grants for *non-municipal childcare*, i.e. undertakings run by a principal other than the local authority. The size of the grant is to correspond to the cost per child in a corresponding municipal undertaking and fees may not exceed those charged by the local authority. About 17% of all children attending pre-schools in 2003 were at a pre-school operating under non-municipal (private) auspices. The corresponding figure for leisure-time centres was 8%. The most common form of non-municipal undertaking is the parent cooperative.

The public childcare system in Sweden has developed rapidly in size, largely over the past three decades. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of children in pre-schools, leisure-time centres and family daycare facilities increased more than tenfold from 61,000 to 705,000. Today, over 80 % of all children aged 1-5 attend pre-school and three quarters of all schoolchildren aged 6-9 receive school-age childcare.

Virtually all local authorities are now fulfilling their obligations under the Education Act to provide childcare at a pre-school, at a leisure-time centre or in a family daycare home without undue delay. There is however a shortage of open leisure-time facilities for children aged 10-12.

This means that today, following a period of intensive expansion, the public childcare

system fully meets requirements, at least in the case of children up to and including the age of nine. Questionnaires to parents show that only 1-2 % of all children in Sweden are still in need of a place at a childcare facility.

Content and educational principles

A distinguishing feature of public childcare in Sweden is that it seeks to care for and educate "the whole child throughout the day". It is based on an overall view of the child's development and learning needs combining care, fostering and education ('educare'). Children learn all the time and with all their senses. It is not possible to identify any specific moment when development or learning actually occurs.

Play and creative activities are given plenty of scope. The importance of play for a child's development and learning is emphasised both in pre-school educational programmes and in school-age childcare, and is nowadays included in the national curriculum for compulsory schools. Playing helps the child to understand the world around it, to develop its imagination and creative powers and to learn to cooperate with others. By tradition, play has been at the heart of public childcare activities in Sweden.

Children are naturally curious and are encouraged to engage in their own activities and discover things for themselves. Educational activities are based on the children's individual capabilities and are linked to what the child has already experienced and learned. By working on a particular theme for a lengthy period and examining it in a variety of ways, the child can introduce new knowledge into a meaningful context.

Another distinguishing feature of Swedish childcare is a high degree of parent-staff cooperation. A settling-in period, which may last for up to two weeks in the case of the youngest children, provides a basis for such cooperation and it is further developed in day-to-day contacts. Via things like parents' meetings and regular discussions with staff about their own child's development, parents are given the opportunity to participate and to influence matters.

Children with special needs have special rights in the Swedish childcare system. These children are entitled to a place at a pre-school or leisure-time centre irrespective of how their parents are occupied. This group is not closely defined—it may include children with disabilities or children with more diffuse problems such as difficulties concentrating or psychosocial disorders. An express principle is that these children's needs are primarily to be met in regular childcare provision and not by means of special treatment. A generally high level of quality in the pre-school or leisure-time centre is viewed as the best form of support that can be offered to children in this category.

Many children in Sweden today have roots in another culture. Supporting children's dual

cultural affiliations and actively encouraging them to develop bilingual skills is one of the specific objectives of childcare in Sweden. To this end, special mother-tongue teachers provide tuition to children whose first language is not Swedish. Some 13 % of such children at pre-school or a family daycare facility receive mother-tongue tuition.

The pre-school curriculum

Pre-schools in Sweden have their own national curriculum as of 1998. Like the compulsory school curriculum it takes the form of a government ordinance and compliance is therefore mandatory.

The curriculum specifies the overall goals and general orientation of pre-schools in Sweden but does not state *how* the goals are to be achieved. It is up to those working in pre-schools to choose which approaches and methods are to apply. The goals and general guidelines cover the following areas:

- standards and values
- development and learning
- children’s own influence
- cooperation between pre-school and home
- interaction with the pre-school class, compulsory school and the leisure-time centre.

The guidelines are addressed partly to all pre-school employees and partly to the individual work team, i.e. the pre-school teachers and daycare attendants working together in the same children’s group. As children start pre-school at different times and develop at different speeds the various goals are specified as targets to work towards and not as objectives that must be reached.

An important part of the curriculum relates to basic democratic values. The same fundamental values are to inform both pre-school and compulsory school. They include care and consideration towards others, solidarity, gender equality and tolerance.

The pre-school curriculum proceeds from the assumption that the child is competent and is constantly seeking to improve its understanding of life around it. The task of the pre-school is to turn this thirst for knowledge to advantage and lay the foundations for a lifelong learning process. In summary, the curriculum states that pre-schools should be fun, secure and instructive for all children who attend.

Staff

By tradition, staff in childcare services in Sweden are well trained. There are four staff categories—pre-school teachers, recreation (leisure-time) instructors, daycare attendants and childminders in family daycare. Pre-school teachers and recreation instructors undergo a three-year educational training programme at university level focusing on teaching methods, development psychology, family sociology and creative activity. Some

of the courses run concurrently. As a rule, daycare attendants have upper-secondary qualifications while municipal childminders have often attended training courses organised by the local authority itself.

Over half of all pre-school employees and staff at leisure-time centres are either trained pre-school teachers or have degrees in recreational or leisure education, while most other employees have some form of training for work with children. About 2 % of pre-school employees and 14 % of staff at leisure-time centres are men.

Division of responsibility

During the 1990s, the division of responsibility between central and local government altered. Management by rule has been replaced by a system placing greater emphasis on management by objectives and results. This means that central government now outlines the overall childcare objectives while the local authorities are responsible for implementing them. The state contributes financially through grants to the local authorities. Nowadays, these government grants are disbursed across the board.

During the period when childcare in Sweden was expanding, state control was stricter. To ensure consistently high quality, the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*), which was the supervisory authority at the time, issued recommendations and guidelines concerning such matters as premises, staff training, staff ratios and the size of children’s groups. Targeted state grants were used to stimulate the expansion of facilities and also to move childcare in the requisite direction.

Today, the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) and the National Agency for School Improvement (*Myndigheten för skolutveckling*) are the central supervisory authorities for childcare and schooling. The tasks of the National Agency for Education include ensuring fulfilment of the national goals for childcare by means of follow-ups, evaluations and supervisory work. The agency is also responsible for national childcare and education statistics. The National Agency for School Improvement initiates and supports local development and improvement to ensure high quality and equal opportunities for children and pupils.

Legislation

The Education Act defines pre-school care and school-age care, the forms in which they operate and the tasks they are to perform. It also affirms the obligation of the local authorities to provide pre-schooling and school-age childcare to children whose parents work or study. The local authorities are further required to offer pre-schooling to children whose parents are unemployed or at home on parental leave to look after a sibling. Universal pre-school places are to be

Proportion of children in different age groups registered in Swedish childcare 2003. Per cent.

Age of child	Pre-school /Leisure-time centre	Family daycare	Total
1	40	5	45
2	79	8	87
3	83	8	91
4	88	8	96
5	90	7	97
1–5	75	7	82
6–9	74	1	75
10–12	10	0	10

Pre-school is for children aged 1–5, leisure-time centres are for children aged 6–12 and family daycare is for children aged 1–12.

offered to all children from the autumn of the year they turn four.

Childcare is to be provided ‘without undue delay’, i.e. normally within three or four months of the parents having applied for a place, and as close to the child’s home as possible. Due consideration is to be given to the parents’ own wishes.

The local authorities have a specific responsibility for children who for physical, mental or other reasons need special support for their development. Under the law, these children are to be offered places in a public pre-school or leisure-time centre if their needs cannot be met in some other way.

The law also specifies quality standards for care provision. Employees are to be trained in such a way or to be so experienced that they can satisfy children’s needs in terms of both care and stimulating educational activities. Children’s groups are to be suitably mixed and of appropriate size and premises are to be well suited to the purpose in hand. The activities provided are to be based on the individual needs of each child, and children requiring special support are to be provided with care appropriate to their needs.

Proportion of children in different types of Swedish pre-schools and leisure-time centres 2003. Per cent.

	Pre-school	Leisure-time centre
Municipal	85	92
Non-municipal	15	8
of which		
parent’s cooperatives	7	1
company-run	4	1
staff cooperatives	2	0
association-run, etc	2	6
Total	100	100

The law also states that local authorities may contribute funding to non-municipal (private) pre-school and school-age care if the activities satisfy the quality requirements under the law and if fees are not unduly high.

Costs and parental fees

Municipal costs for public childcare are met by state grants, local tax revenue and parental fees. Gross costs for childcare in Sweden amounted in 2003 to SEK 46,000 million, which corresponds to 13 % of the local authorities' total costs, or almost 2 % of the Swedish GDP.

Each local authority decides for itself the size of parental fees and how its fee systems is to be constructed. In the 1990s, fees became more expensive and were increasingly linked to family income and the child's hours of attendance. As a result, an increase in family income was often of little financial advantage. This threatened to undermine the willingness of parents—particularly mothers—to resume working after a period of unemployment or to work longer hours.

To remedy problems of this kind, a system of maximum childcare fees was introduced on 1 January 2002. This involved setting a ceiling for the amount parents could be required to pay for their child.

- At pre-school facilities (pre-schools and family daycare units), the fee charged may be no more than 1–3 % of the family's income, depending on how many children the family has. The fee may not, however, exceed SEK 1,260 per month for the family's first child, SEK 840 for the second child, and SEK 420 for the third child.
- In the school-age childcare system (leisure-time centres and family daycare units), the fee charged may be no more than 1–2 % of the family's income. The fee may not, however, exceed SEK 840 per month for the family's first child and SEK 420 for the second and third child.

Local authorities are free to decide for themselves whether they wish to introduce a fee ceiling. Those who do so receive state compensation for loss of revenue as well as

grants specifically earmarked for improvements in municipal childcare services. During the first year of operation, 288 of the country's 290 local authorities introduced such a ceiling, and the remainder have since joined the system.

The National Agency for Education continuously evaluates the impact of the fee ceiling. Results from the first two years show that in the great majority of cases there was a substantial reduction in the amount parents had to pay. In 2002, parental fees accounted for 11 % of the gross costs of public childcare, compared with 18 % in the previous year. This corresponds to SEK 2,800 million in lost revenue, a sum that is amply offset however by the state grants that local authorities have received in compensation for the reform.

The fee ceiling has not caused any deterioration in childcare standards. The state grant that local authorities have been given to assure the quality of their services has meant that staff ratios have been maintained. According to the evaluations carried out by the National Agency for Education, hours spent at pre-schools and leisure-time centres have not increased, despite the fact that fees are no longer linked to children's length of attendance.

Quality

The Education Act sets out quality requirements for public childcare in Sweden. In addition, the national pre-school curriculum provides for pre-school activities of high quality and equivalent standard throughout the country. In the case of leisure-time centres, family daycare facilities, open pre-school activities and open leisure-time activities, the National Agency for Education has developed general guidelines specifying what represents good quality in care provision.

In the 1990s, Swedish childcare was subjected to substantial cuts, along with other parts of the public sector. This has led to larger groups and less staff per child. The average size of pre-school groups increased from 14 children to 17 between 1990 and 2003. At the same time, staffing ratios fell. This trend has been halted in recent years, however, and in 2003 the number of children

per member of staff was 5.4, a level that has remained largely unchanged since 1999.

Leisure-time centres, too, have seen major changes. In 2003, groups averaged 30 children, which is almost twice as many as in 1990, while staffing ratios have more than halved over the same period. The National Agency for Education has observed in its evaluation studies that the country's leisure-time centres frequently do not have the resources to perform the tasks entrusted to them.

Research shows that the size of child groups and the ratio of staff are vital factors in determining the quality of childcare provision, not least in the case of the youngest children and children with special needs. Concern has been expressed in many quarters, not least among parents, that groups at pre-schools and leisure-time centres are too large and/or that staffing ratios are too low.

The Government has accepted this argument and responded by taking a number of steps to assure the quality of childcare provision. It has, for instance, instructed the National Agency for Education to develop quality indicators for pre-schools and leisure-time centres at both national and local level. In addition, the agency is to produce a set of advisory guidelines concerning quality in pre-school care and education to help the local authorities in their quality assurance efforts.

To further improve pre-school standards, local authorities are also to be given state grants earmarked for the recruitment of additional pre-school teachers and other staff. A total of SEK 1,000 million has been allocated for this purpose in 2005 and a further SEK 2,000 million per annum for 2006 and 2007. Funding will then be incorporated into the general government grant. It is estimated that this will reduce the size of groups to an average of 15 children with three full-time members of staff.

Besides the cuts, the new management approach has fuelled the discussion about quality and equivalence in Swedish childcare in recent years. Efforts are under way at both municipal level and workplace level to develop methods for following up and evaluating the quality of care provision.

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