

# CHILD CARE IN SWEDEN

*Skolverket*

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## TWIN TASKS

Swedish child care has twin aims. One is to make it possible for parents to combine parenthood with employment or studies and the other is to support and encourage children's development and learning and help them grow up under conditions that are conducive to their well-being. This dual-purpose approach was officially laid down in the early 1970s with the launching of a large-scale development programme for

Swedish child care. Along with the parental insurance and child benefit systems, child care has been a cornerstone of Swedish family welfare policy while at the same having an explicitly educational orientation. In recent years, the educational policy aspects of child care have come increasingly to the fore and in 1996 responsibility for public child care was transferred to the Ministry of Education.



## 4 EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Swedish child care is based on an overall view of the child's development and learning needs bringing together health care, social care, fostering and teaching. Proper care is seen as a prerequisite if the child is to feel happy and content, which in turn is a prerequisite for its ability to absorb knowledge and to progress in life. Ensuring the well-being of a child also has educational implications. When young children are to eat or rest, or when an adult helps an older child sort out conflicts with other children, they learn about themselves as well as about others and about life in general. Children learn all the time and with all their senses. It is not possible to identify any specific occasion when development or learning actually occurs.

Pedagogical work is based on the children's individual capabilities and draws on what the child has already experienced and learned. Children are encouraged to engage in their own activities and discover things for themselves, for instance in theme work. 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.

Play has always been central to Swedish child care. Nowadays it is even included in the national curriculum for compulsory schools. Playing games helps the child to understand the world around it, to develop its imagination and creative powers and to learn to cooperate with others. Play is at the heart of public child care activities in Sweden.

The social development of children takes place in groups. Consequently, the group has an important educational function in child care, and both the individual child and the group are focal points in pedagogical programmes. A contented child contributes to a pleasant group atmosphere that in turn has a favourable effect on the other children.

Children in need of special support have special rights in the child care system. They are entitled to a place at a preschool or leisure-time centre irrespective of how their parents are occupied. This group may include disabled children or chil-

dren with more diffuse problems such as difficulties concentrating or psychosocial conditions. Their needs are primarily to be met in regular child care and not by singling them out for special treatment. High overall quality in the preschool or leisure-time centre is viewed as the best kind of support for many of these children.

In Sweden today, many children have roots in some other culture. Child care has to a large extent become a multicultural meeting-place. Supporting children's dual cultural affiliations and their chances of actively developing bilingual skills is one of the express objectives of child care in Sweden. Some 15 per cent of children at preschool or leisure-time centres whose home language is not Swedish receive mother-tongue tuition from special language teachers.

## VARIOUS FORMS OF CHILD CARE

Public child care is extended to children aged 1-12. In Sweden, compulsory school begins at the age of seven but prior to that almost all six-year-olds attend voluntary preschool classes designed to prepare them for the first grade. Children who have yet to start school or preschool classes for six-year-olds can attend regular preschools, family daycare homes and open preschools while older children have access to leisure-time centres, family daycare homes and open leisure-time activities.

The **preschool** (*förskola*) cares for children while their parents are away working or studying or if the children have special needs of their own. Preschools are open all year round and daily opening times are varied to fit in with parents' working hours. Children are registered and the parents pay a fee that in most areas is linked to the family's income and the child's attendance.

In 1999, some 64 per cent of all children aged 1-5 attended preschool, or 319,000 children in all. Children are generally divided into groups of between 15 and 20. As a rule, three employees - preschool teachers and daycare attendants - are allocated to each group. The average preschool comprises three such groups.

The **family daycare home** (*familjedaghem*) involves municipal childminders providing care in their own homes while the parents are working or studying. The children are registered and opening hours are varied to fit in with the parents' schedules. The family pays a fee in the same way as for preschool care. Family daycare complements preschool by providing in particular for children who for one reason or another need to be in smaller groups or who live far from the nearest preschool facility. This alternative is more common in rural areas and in small towns than in metropolitan areas.

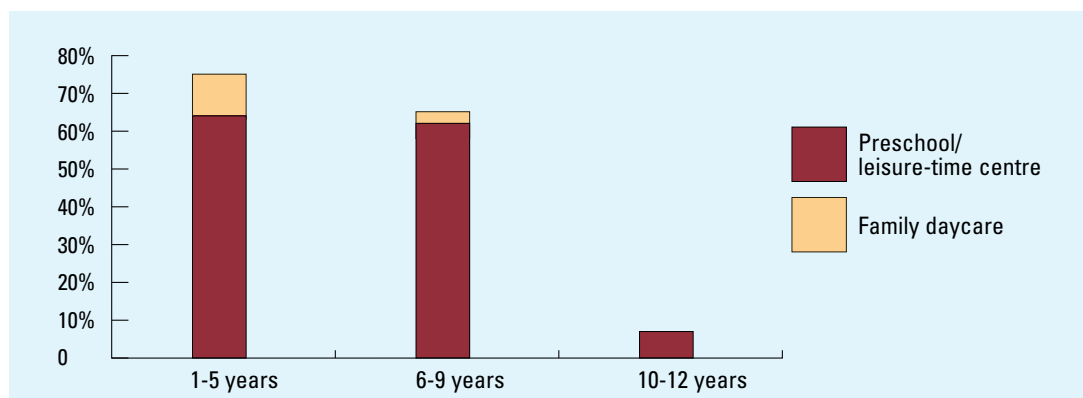
The number of children in family daycare has steadily declined since the late 1980s. Today, some 11 per cent of all children aged 1-5 receive this form of care. Family daycare is sometimes provided for schoolchildren outside school hours as well. In the autumn of 1999, some 3 per cent of all children aged 6-9 were in family daycare. All told, about 69,000 children were provided with this form of care in 1999.

The **open preschool** (*öppna förskolan*) is an alternative to regular preschool for the children of parents who are at home during the day. It also supplements family daycare. Together with their parents or municipal childminders, children are invited to take part in a pedagogical group activity. In some housing areas, open preschools collaborate with public bodies like the social welfare services and the maternity care and child health care services. The children are not registered and are not required to attend regularly. Most open preschools are free of charge. In the autumn of 1999 there were about 900 open preschools in Sweden.

The **leisure-time centre** (*fritidshem*) provides care for children whose parents are in gainful employment or studying during the time the child is not in school, i.e. mornings, afternoons and during holidays. Leisure-time centres are open all year round and daily opening hours are varied to fit in with parents' schedules. As in the case of preschool and family daycare, parents pay a fee which in most areas is linked to the family's income and the child's overall attendance. In the autumn of 1999, some 62 per cent of all children aged 6-9 and 7 per cent of those aged 10-12 attended a leisure-time centre.

Leisure-time centres are intended as a supplement to schooling and are supposed to help children in their develop-

PROPORTION OF CHILDREN (%) IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS REGISTERED IN SWEDISH CHILD CARE 1999.





ment and provide them with meaningful recreation. Policy-makers have declared their intention to bring schools and leisure-time centres closer together and today most leisure-time centres collaborate with schools in the area to a greater or lesser degree.

In 1999, some 332,000 children attended leisure-time centres, three times as many as in 1990. The increase has been particularly marked in recent years. This is due to the fact that more and more six-year-olds are attending leisure-time centres and that children born in the baby boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s have now reached school age.

**Open leisure-time activities** (*öppen fritidsverksamhet*) 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 not very widespread. About three quarters of the country's local authorities lack open activities directed at this age group.

Local authorities can provide grants for non-municipal child care, i.e. undertakings run by a principal other than the local authority. About 15 per cent of all registered children in preschools attend a facility that operates under non-municipal auspices. The most common form is the parent cooperative.

Today, the overwhelming majority of children in Sweden receive child care in one form or another. 75 per cent of all children aged 1-5 are registered and 65 per cent of all school-children aged 6-9. Virtually all local authorities are now able to provide places at a preschool, at a leisure-time centre or in a family daycare home without undue delay. The children of the unemployed however often have to do without child care. About 40 per cent of local authorities have adopted rules whereby a preschool child forfeits its place in the child care system when a parent becomes unemployed, and only one local authority in four makes child care available to children with a jobless parent. In the case of children with a parent who is staying at home to look after a younger sibling, the rules are even more restrictive.



## 10 PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM

Since August 1998, preschools have had their own national curriculum. Like the compulsory school curriculum it takes the form of a government decree and compliance is therefore mandatory. The curriculum specifies the overall goals and



orientation of preschools in Sweden but does not state how the goals are to be achieved. It is up to those working with the children to decide which approaches and methods are most appropriate.

### *The national curriculum lists the following goals and guidelines:*

- norms and values
- development and learning
- children's own influence
- cooperation between preschool and home
- interaction with the preschool class, compulsory school and the leisure-time centre.

An important part of the curriculum deals with basic values. The same fundamental democratic values are to permeate both preschool and compulsory school. They involve care and consideration towards others, solidarity, gender equality and tolerance.

The preschool 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 preschool is to make the most of this thirst for knowledge and lay the foundations for a lifelong learning process. In summary, the curriculum states that preschools should be fun, secure and instructive for all children who attend them.





## ROLE OF THE PARENTS

Parents have long played an important part in the child care system. During the settling-in period, which may take up to two weeks for the youngest children, the groundwork is laid for close contacts between parents and staff. This interaction is further enhanced in the daily contacts that follow, for instance when the parents deliver and fetch their children. Parents can influence developments by sharing what they have learned about their own particular child.

At least once a term, preschools and leisure-time centres organize parents' meetings. Sometimes they may also organize soup dinners, markets or other activities at which children, parents and staff can get together. Regular 'progress discussions' take place, at which parents get the chance to talk things over with one or more of the staff at the preschool or leisure-time centre, or with the municipal childminder.

## STAFF

Staff in child care services in Sweden are well trained. Virtually all have some form of training for working with children. There are four staff categories - preschool teachers, recreational instructors, daycare attendants and childminders in family daycare.

Preschool teachers and recreational instructors undergo a three-year pedagogical training programme at university 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 organized by the local authority itself.

Over half of all preschool employees have university degrees in preschool education while just over 40 per cent of



staff are daycare attendants. At leisure-time centres some 70 per cent have degrees in recreational or leisure education or in some other kind of teacher's training, while 20 per cent are daycare attendants. About 5 per cent of the staff at preschools and leisure-time centres are men.

On average, a preschool teacher or a recreational instructor earns SEK 15,500 a month, a daycare attendant earns SEK 14,000 and a childminder in family daycare SEK 13,500. This may be compared to an average monthly wage of SEK 18,500 for a compulsory school teacher and of SEK 19,500 for an upper secondary school teacher.

## DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

During the 1990s, governance by the rulebook has been replaced by a more target-oriented and results-oriented system. This means that central government now outlines the overall goals for child care while the local authorities are responsible for implementing them. Central government contributes financially through grants to the local authorities.

Today, the National Agency for Education is the central supervisory authority for both child care and schooling. Its tasks include ensuring fulfilment of the national goals for child care by means of follow-ups, evaluation, development research and supervisory work, and generally supporting progress in the child care sector.

## LEGISLATION

The regulations governing child care are set out in the Education Act. The Act defines the forms of child care that are to be provided. It also spells out the obligation of local auth-



14 orities to provide child care for children aged 1-12 to the extent required in order for parents to work or study. This obligation also applies in the case of children with care needs of their own irrespective of how the parents are occupied. Children in need of special support are always entitled to a place at a preschool or leisure-time centre.

The law also specifies requirements with regard to the quality of the care provided. Employees are to be so well-trained or so experienced that they can satisfy the children's needs as regards both care and stimulating pedagogical activities. Premises are to be well suited to the purpose in hand, children's groups are to be suitably mixed and of appropriate size and the activities provided are to be based on the individual needs of each child.

The present Education Act came into force in 1995 and prescribed stricter compliance on the part of the local authorities than previously. One of the reasons for tightening up the law was that central government's scope for influencing developments was reduced when its earmarked grants for child care were replaced by general-purpose grants.

## FINANCING

Child care in Sweden is financed partly by central government grants and partly by tax revenue and parental fees. The government grants are not specifically earmarked for child care but are part of a general-purpose grant to be used for a number of different sectors.

In 1998, gross costs for child care amounted to SEK 39,000 million, which corresponds to 15 per cent of the local authorities' total costs. Parental fees accounted for just under 17 per cent of the gross cost. Local authorities themselves decide how large a fee parents pay and how the fee system is structured. As a result, fees vary considerably from place to place.





## PART OF A LIFELONG LEARNING PROCESS

In pace with the growth of child care to encompass an increasing number of children, its importance for educational policy has also grown. This was one of the reasons why the Ministry of Education took over responsibility for child care from the Ministry for Social Affairs in 1996.

The aim is to bring child care and schooling closer together and encourage the development of a joint pedagogical approach. All pedagogical activities for children and young people are to be seen as part of a lifelong learning process. The preschool is the first stage in the educational system and its curriculum takes the same view of how children learn and develop as the compulsory school curriculum. These two curricula along with the curriculum for voluntary forms of schooling cover the first twenty years of learning for children and young people in the Swedish educational system.



## 16 FROM CRÈCHES TO DAYCARE CENTRES

The roots of the Swedish child care system can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century. Industrialization and migration to the towns had given rise to widespread poverty



among families. Infant crèches (barnkrubbor) were opened for the children of single mothers obliged to work for a living. Work shelters (arbetsstugor) took in schoolchildren from poor families in the afternoons and sought to teach them some rudimentary crafts at the same time. Both the crèche and the work shelter were social institutions usually run by private citizens or by charities. They were joined by the kindergartens

(barnträdgårdar), based on the ideas of German educator *Friedrich Fröbel*. Kindergartens were educationally oriented and were attended mainly by the children of well-to-do families.

During the 1930s and 1940s the public authorities gradually assumed greater responsibility for the care and fostering of children. In the mid-1940s, government grants were introduced for both work shelters and infant crèches. A growing number of local authorities took over the running of the crèches, which were renamed day nurseries, and of the work shelters, which became leisure-time centres. The number of children at these centres however was still fairly modest. Playschools (lekskolor) were more widespread.

In the 1960s demand for child care provision increased. Female labour was in demand and calls for a major expansion of child care facilities intensified. In 1968 the government of the day appointed a special commission, the National

Commission on Child Care (Barnstugeutredningen), instructing it to present proposals as to how a child care system that met social, educational and supervisory needs might be developed in Sweden.

The National Commission decisively influenced the future direction of Swedish child care. Its report formulated vital pedagogical principles and ideas that made a considerable impact and still survive today. Among other things it laid the foundations for the Swedish preschool model - daycare centres and playschools were to be combined in a preschool system that would serve the interests of children as well as allowing parents to work or study. The report condemned the outdated view that supervision was something you offered the poor while educational activities were for the stimulation of better-off children. Care and education were to be merged in a completely new way.

Despite rapid progress in the 1970s and early 1980s local authorities were unable to expand facilities to such an extent that the waiting list for places disappeared. The birthrate had increased rapidly, as had the number of mothers in gainful employment, and the target drawn up by the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) was not achieved. Legislation was therefore tightened up in 1995, when local authorities became duty bound to provide child care without undue delay for all children requiring it. This rule together with the high birthrate in Sweden led to the creation of a record number of new child care openings in the mid-1990s. Waiting lists disappeared and today the number of places largely conforms to needs. Public child care has become an integral part of the Swedish welfare state and of most families' everyday lives.

A highly-developed child care system has been a precondition for the changes in family patterns and gender roles that have been taking place since the 1970s. 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.



# FACTS ABOUT SWEDEN

- Sweden has an area of 450,000 km<sup>2</sup> (174,000 sq. miles). Half its land surface is covered with forest and less than a tenth is farmland. There are almost 100,000 lakes around the country. The highest mountain is Kebnekaise, 2,111 m (6,928 ft) above sea level.
- The distance between the country's northernmost and southernmost points is 1,574 km. At its widest point Sweden measures 499 km.
- The warm Gulf Stream gives Sweden a milder climate than other countries at the same latitude. In northern regions the summers are light and the sun shines virtually all day and night.
- Sweden is rich in natural assets in the form of forest, hydroelectric power, iron ore, uranium and other minerals, but imports oil and coal to meet the country's energy requirements.
- The population numbers 8.9 million. Just over 1.6 million people live in the capital of Stockholm.
- On average, Swedish women have 1.5 children each (1998). Average life expectancy is 76.7 years for men and 81.8 years for women.
- Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary form of government. The present king is Carl XVI Gustaf. Parliament (Riksdag) has a single chamber and 351 members elected every four years. The voting age is 18 and at the last election the turnout was 81.4 per cent.
- The country has 289 local authorities with a considerable degree of autonomy. Their responsibilities include child care and education.
- The employment rate is 73 per cent for men and 70 per cent for women (aged 16-64). Women often work part-time. Almost half of all employed mothers of young children have part-time jobs.
- Unemployment, which remained low in Sweden many years, accelerated to over 8 per cent at the beginning of the 1990s. In the autumn of 1999 it was 5.2 per cent. Men tend to be unemployed more often than women (5.7 per cent as against 4.7 per cent). Unemployment is greatest among young people under 25 (10.2 per cent).
- When a child is born, the parents are entitled to 450 days of leave paid for by the Social Insurance Office. For most of the leave period (80 per cent) parental benefit is on a par with sickness benefit. The 450 days of leave have to be taken before the child turns eight.
- Child benefit amounts to SEK 750 a month per child and is disbursed to all families with children under 16. For families with three or more children, an extra supplement is provided.
- Single parents are paid a maintenance grant to ensure that their children enjoy the same kind of standard as other children.
- Families with low incomes who need help with their housing costs are entitled to housing benefit.
- Medical care and dental care for children and young people under 20 is free of charge.
- Schooling is compulsory for all children from the age of seven. Preschool classes for six-year-olds are voluntary. The compulsory education period is nine years.

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## NEW REFORMS - FOR INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY

In the autumn of 2000, the Riksdag passed a decision on the introduction of new child care reforms. These reforms aim at providing more children with access to pre-school and leisure time centres and represent an important step towards the government's long-term goal - free child care facilities that are available to all children.

### MAXIMUM FEE

A maximum fee for pre-school activities and care of school-age children is to be introduced on 1st January, 2002. This means that a ceiling will be set on the fees payable by parents for their children.

At pre-school facilities (pre-school and home daycare nursery), the fee charged may be no more than between one and three percent of the family's income, depending on how many children the family has. The fee may not, however, exceed 1,140 kronor per month for the family's first child, 760 kronor for the second child, and 380 kronor for the third child.

In the school-age child care system (leisure time centres and home daycare nurseries), the fee charged may be no more than between one and two percent of the family's income. The fee may not, however, exceed 760 kronor per month for the family's first child and 380 kronor for the second and third child.

For the municipalities, introduction of the maximum fee will be voluntary. Those municipalities adopting the new system will receive compensation for loss of income and they will also receive funds for the introduction of measures to ensure that there is no drop in overall quality.

### CHILDREN OF THE UNEMPLOYED OR PEOPLE ON PARENTAL LEAVE

On 1st July, 2001, municipalities will become liable to offer places at pre-school or in a home daycare nursery to children between one and five years old whose parents are unemployed. Today, this obligation extends only to children whose parents are gainfully employed or who are studying. Children are to be guaranteed a place at the school or daycare nursery for at least three hours per day. On 1st January, 2002, the obligation will also apply to children whose parents are on parental leave and to a younger sibling.

### UNIVERSAL PRE-SCHOOL

On 1st January, 2003, universal pre-school is to be introduced for all four and five-year olds. All children will be offered free schooling for at least 525 hours per year. This is equivalent to about three hours per day during the school terms.

Although the provision of universal pre-school will be mandatory for the municipalities, children will be able to participate on a voluntary basis.



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