

# FINLAND

## Key Contextual Data

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Sources are outlined at the end of each section. Full details of all sources are to be found in the references section at the end of the key contextual data profile. Individual statistical data used in tables are indicated by an asterisk\*, both in the table and in the sources.

## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

### ECEC system type and auspices

Finland has a unitary system of early childhood education and care, organised in two stages. In January 2013, national responsibility for centre-based and home-based ECEC provision for children up to age 6 was transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (*Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö*) to the Ministry of Education and Culture (*Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö - OKM*). Finnish ECEC is therefore no longer part of the social welfare system. Since its introduction in the 1990s, pre-primary education for 6-year olds in the year preceding school entry at age 7 has been under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.

Together with the Finnish National Agency for Education (formerly: Finnish National Board of Education), the Ministry of Education and Culture determines goals, content and approaches for the early childhood sector. The organisation and management of ECEC is the responsibility of the municipalities or of private service owners/providers.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2017.  
Ministry of Education and Culture 2016.  
OECD 2015.

### General objectives and legislative framework

Equality of opportunity is the main overarching objective of education policy in Finland. Education is seen as a basic right for all citizens regardless of their age, place of residence, financial situation, gender, home language or religion.

The legal foundations of ECEC are the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (*Varhaiskasvatustaki*, 2015), which replaced the Act on Children's Day Care (1973) (*Päivähoitolaki*, 1973) and the Basic Education Act (*Perusopetuslaki*, 1998). The term 'early education' (*varhaiskasvatus*) replaced the term 'day care' (*päivähoito*).

Further goals and principles were set down in the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland (*Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelman perusteet*, 2003, amended 2005) as a recommendation for the providers of ECEC services. As from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2017, new National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, issued by the Finnish National Board of Education in 2016, came into effect. They are legally binding, and not – as previously – just a recommendation. A revised National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (*Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet* 2014) came into effect in 2016.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2017.  
Finnish National Board of Education 2016.  
Onnismaa, E.-L. 2017.

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory enrolment age

Since 1996, all children under compulsory school age have been entitled to a place in ECEC provision. The municipalities are obliged to provide the places needed. Government cuts have led to a change in policy and places are now granted to parents who are working or full-time students. Since August 2016, children with parent(s) at home (e.g. workless) are entitled to 20 hours a week in ECEC provision which can be arranged in various ways. This does not necessarily mean regular provision of pedagogical activities four hours per day: the parents may choose how they use the statutory hours (which could mean, for example, two ten-hour days weekly), and these hours can also be arranged in family day care or in a play group, and must not necessarily be in a centre-based setting.

In August 2015, enrolment in the pre-primary year became compulsory. Pre-primary classes had been well attended up till then, with 98% of 6-year olds participating. Basic school begins at age 7.

**Sources:** EFA 2015.  
Eurydice 2017.  
Finnish National Board of Education 2016.  
Onnismaa, E.-L. 2017.  
Salmi, M., J. Närvi and J. Lammi-Taskula 2017.

## Main types of provision

At the end of paid parental leave, usually when the child is 9 or 10 months old, parents can choose whether they wish to enrol their child in a municipal or private ECEC centre, or in municipal or private family day care provision, or whether one parent stays at home with the child. For the latter two options, a care allowance is granted up to the child's third birthday.

**Early childhood centres** (*päiväkoti*) provide full-day (max. ten hours) or part-day (max. five hours) care for children up to age 7. Children whose family language is Swedish or Sami are able to attend ECEC centres where their home language is the main language.

**Family day care** (*perhepäivähoito*) is regulated home-based provision for children from 10 months up to school entry age. It is organised (a) by the municipalities, also as group family day care, and (b) by private providers, with parents using the care allowance.

**Pre-primary classes** (*esiopetus*) for 6-year olds are free of charge and since August 2015 the child's parents/guardians are expected to enrol their child, but it is not a legal obligation. Children who live more than 5 kilometres away from the nearest pre-primary class are transported there free of charge. Pre-primary classes are organised either in early childhood centres or in schools and provided for 700 hours/year. In the municipal pre-primary groups the opening hours are generally aligned to school opening hours, i.e. four or up to a maximum of five hours a day.

Parents whose children attend a pre-primary group are entitled to access other forms of provision. Most children also attend an early childhood centre in order to guarantee full-day provision. When pre-primary classes are organised in ECEC centres, the children can stay under the same roof (with the same staff) for the rest of the day after the pre-primary class hours. In other cases, after school provision may be organised e.g. in a playgroup, particularly if the pre-primary class is located in a school building.

**Playgroups:** Beyond the classical forms of provision, the Lutheran church parishes and other non-profit organisations organise sessional groups (*päiväkerho*/playgroups) for children and parents. Many municipalities have started to organise playgroup activities for children who do not fulfil the requirements for full-time day care. However, the pedagogical standards (e.g. staff education and training requirements) in playgroups are not equivalent to the standards for mainstream ECEC centres. In many municipalities, playgroup activities are offered only on some weekdays and, for example, for only three hours per day.

**Sources:** European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.  
Eurydice 2016.  
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.  
Onnismaa, E.-L. 2017.

## Provider structures

Early childhood education and care is provided by public and private agencies. The municipalities are required to guarantee parents access to ECEC services. If the number of places in publicly-run services is not sufficient, the municipal authorities are entitled to inform parents about places in private provision. Slightly more than one half of 1- to 5-year olds attend public provision. In 2016, 14.2% of all children attending ECEC services were enrolled in a publicly subsidised privately run setting. In 2015, this proportion was lower (13%), i.e. the proportion of private ECEC providers in Finland is growing.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2016.  
Ministry of Education and Culture 2016.

## Participation rates in regulated provision

Table 1 shows the development of participation rates over time. In 2015, around two thirds of children under age 3 were not enrolled in early childhood provision. This can be at least partly explained by the comprehensive parental leave system. By way of contrast, 82.8% of children aged 3 to school entry attended a centre-based setting.

Table 1

**Finland: Participation rates in ECEC centre-based settings by age and duration of attendance, 2005-2015\***

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %**	3 years to school entry, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	8	25
	Over 30 hours	19	51
	No attendance	74	24
2010	1 to 29 hours	8	21
	Over 30 hours	20	56
	No attendance	72	23
2015	1 to 29 hours	7.9	23.2
	Over 30 hours	24.6	59.6
	No attendance	67.4	17.2

Table 2 shows the enrolment ratios of children according to age groups.

Table 2

**Finland: Number of children in ECEC settings and enrolment ratios according to age, 2015\*\***

Age-groups	Number	Share in %
Under 2 years	17,184	14.8
2-year olds	31,780	52.6
3-year olds	41,696	68.4
4-year olds	46,366	74.5
5-year olds	48,769	78.8
6-year olds	59,429	97.0
<b>3- to under 7-year olds</b>	<b>196,260</b>	<b>79.7<sup>+</sup></b>
<b>2- to under 7-year olds</b>	<b>48,964</b>	<b>27.7<sup>+</sup></b>

\* own calculations based on Eurostat data of 2015

**Sources:** \*Eurostat 2017f.  
\*\*Eurostat 2017h, 2017i.

## Financing and costs for parents

In 2013, 3.4% of the Finnish GDP was allocated to financial benefits for children and families, representing a high share of government spending compared to the EU average of 2.4%

700 hours of pre-primary education for 6-year olds is free of charge for parents, whereas fees for additional hours and for younger children in ECEC provision are based on the family's size and income and depend on the requested hours of day care. Charges in private day-care are determined by the service provider, but it is possible to receive a private care allowance for these expenses.

Fees are generally higher in the privately run ECEC centres than in municipal provision. In 2015, the highest fee (including food) for a full-day place in a municipal ECEC centre was 283€ per month. As from August 2016, fees are expected to rise in general to 354€, although they will be reduced for low-income families. Parental fees cover around 14% of the centre's running costs. In order to mitigate inequalities between municipalities, all municipalities receive government transfers since 2010, whereby the number of children under age 6 living in a specific municipality is taken into account. In 2015, 25% of the total expenditure on ECEC was covered by government transfers.

**Sources:** EPIC 2017.  
Eurydice 2017.  
European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.  
Kela 2015.

## Staff-child ratios

Children are usually grouped in three age bands: children under 3 years of age, 3- to 6-year olds and 6- to 7-year olds in the pre-primary classes. The number of children in a group may not exceed the number of children allowed for three adults.

The required staff-child ratios are laid down by law: 1 qualified member of staff for 4 children under age 3 and for 8 children over age 3 (up to 2016 the ratio was 1:7 for children over age 3). However, not all municipalities, particularly the larger cities, have changed the former ratio requirement.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2016.  
Onnismaa, E.-L. 2017.

## Curricular frameworks

ECEC settings and pre-primary education are guided by two national curricular documents. For ECEC settings, the former National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (2003, amended 2005), have been replaced since Autumn 2017 by the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016\**. Five key areas of learning are formulated: (1) the world of languages, (2) artistic expression, (3) myself and my community, (4) exploring my environment, (5) growing up and developing in motion.

A revised version of the *National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education 2014 (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014)* was introduced in 2016. In the newest edition it is stated

that the underlying principles emphasise the child's individuality, the significance of active learning and the importance of acting as a group member. The focus is on play-based and child-initiated learning and a positive outlook on life.

Although the curricular frameworks define certain areas of content, these are seen more as an orientation for the educational staff in order to guarantee a balance in activities for supporting the children's development. Centre-specific education programmes are expected to include the main curricular areas, including forms of co-operation between staff and parents.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2016.  
EFA 2015.  
\*Finnish National Board of Education 2016.  
Finnish National Agency of Education 2017.

## Inclusion agenda

### *Children with special educational needs and disabilities*

Children with special educational needs are integrated wherever possible into ECEC settings close to their home. According to the Education Act, each child should receive the support that he or she needs. Either the children with special educational needs are placed in integrated special groups (five children with special needs and seven children without special needs) or in special classes (six to eight children with special educational needs). Both of these groups are located in mainstream ECEC centres. A special needs teacher is responsible for these groups together with a team that may consist of a kindergarten teacher and a nursery nurse.

### *Children with a background of migration*

In Finland, both Finnish and Swedish are the two main official languages. In some ECEC centres, generally either the one or the other language is the main language of communication. Municipalities in areas in which the Sami language is spoken are expected to provide ECEC settings in this language, too.

According to national statistics\*, 4.4% of people living in Finland in 2016 came from a non-Finnish background; among these, 39.9% came from other EU28 countries. The shares in the age-group of children under age 4 are 4.9% and 35.7% respectively. The language support for children whose home language is not Finnish or Swedish is provided in ECEC centres according to the demand. The quantity and quality of language support vary.

**Sources:** Eurydice 2017.  
\*Statistics Finland 2017.  
Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Board of Education 2016.

## Monitoring – Evaluation – Research

Monitoring and evaluation procedures in Finland related to the ECEC settings, staff, curriculum implementation and children's progress are regulated at the local level and financed through the municipal budgets. Following the law reform of 2015, responsibility for the monitoring of ECEC provision was transferred from the National Institute for Health and Welfare to the Finnish National Agency for Education (up to 2017: National Board of Education).

For each child, an individual educational plan is drawn up in co-operation with the parents. According to the new ECEC law, this is now obligatory and it is the Kindergarten Teacher's responsibility to interview each child's parents/guardians and draw up the plan. The plan includes areas related to the child's experiences, well-being, interests and strengths, and also documents specific

needs for support and guidance. The staff are expected to observe and document the children's behaviour regularly and adjust planning accordingly. Portfolios are frequently used as a form of documentation. This child-related information forms an important basis for discussions with parents. Parental surveys are also used to gauge opinions on the work of the centre.

It is not unusual for each child to receive a kind of confirmation certificate of participation at the end of his or her time in an early childhood centre. This may also describe the specific programme of the centre attended.

External inspections (staff-child ratios, hygiene and safety aspects, staff qualifications) are rare, and usually only carried out in the case of a complaint. Decisions about self-evaluation and preferred assessment instruments are a matter for the local authorities. The frequency of evaluations also varies from municipality to municipality\*.

**Sources:** EFA 2015.  
Eurydice 2017.  
\*OECD 2015.  
Onnismaa, E.-L. 2017.

## Parental leave arrangements

**Maternity leave** (*äitiysvapaa/moderskapsledighet*) is guaranteed for 105 working days (about four months); between 30 and 50 of these can be taken before the expected birth-date. Two weeks before and two weeks after the birth are compulsory. Pay is income-related; during the first 56 days 90% of the annual income is guaranteed. Payments are reduced when the annual income exceeds 57,110€; below 1,426€ a monthly lump sum of 593€ is paid. After 56 days, the payment comprises 70% of the annual income. Requirements are the possession of a Finnish passport and a 180-day compulsory insurance in Finland or another EU country, or in Switzerland or Israel. Excluding the four compulsory weeks, mothers are allowed to work during maternity leave.

Fathers are entitled to 54 working days of **paternity leave** (*isyysvapaa/faderskapsledighet*) until the child turns two years. 18 of these can be taken while the mother is on maternity leave or parental leave. Payment is 70% of the annual income with a ceiling of 37,113€. It is not possible to work during paternity leave.

**Parental leave** (*vanhempainvapaa/föräldraledighet*) is guaranteed for 158 working days, starting at the end of maternity leave. These days can be shared between the parents, but cannot be taken at the same time. Payment is 70% of the annual income with a ceiling of 37,113€. Parents with an annual income below 1,425€ or parents working during parental leave receive a minimum payment. Parental leave can be taken in part-time (at least for two months at a time and but only if both parents take part-time leave) with reduced payments.

In 2015, 80% of fathers took up to 18 days paternity leave (on average 15 days). This uptake has been on the rise again since 2014, after sinking somewhat in the years before 2014. The 158 parental leave days are mostly taken by mothers; less than 4% of mothers work during the parental leave period. In 2015, almost 5% of fathers also made use of parental leave entitlements.

At the end of parental leave, parents can decide whether to make use of an ECEC setting or to receive a home care allowance (342€ monthly for the first child until the third birthday) and look after their child at home. According to the national statistics, 102,414 women and 7,626 men made use of the home care benefit in 2015\*.

Parents can also decide whether to reduce their working hours following parental leave until the end of the child's second year at school. Parents with children under age 3 who work less than 80% of their regular working hours receive a monthly benefit of approximately 162€, if they work only 60% the benefit amounts to 244€.

After the parental leave period, parents are entitled to place their child in public daycare until the child starts school, usually at the age of seven. Since August 2016 this entitlement is reduced to 20 hours per week, unless both parents work or study full-time.

**Sources:** EPIC 2017  
Salmi, M., J. Närvi and J. Lammi-Taskula 2017.  
\*Statistics Finland 2017.

## Historical highlights and shifts

1888	First kindergarten established based on Froebel's educational philosophy
1927	First framework issued for the public funding of day care facilities for children
1973	Act on Children's Day Care
1983	Child Law: "All children are equal before the law."
1985	Legal entitlement to a place in early childhood provision for all under 3-year olds, implemented gradually up to 1990.
1996	Legal entitlement to a place in early childhood provision from the age of one up to school starting age
2000	Pre-primary education reform implemented (law approved in Parliament in 1998): the year preceding school entry free of charge for all 6-year olds; first <i>National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education</i> announced
2005	Revision of the 2003 <i>National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland</i>
2013	Transfer of responsibility for ECEC up to school entry at age 7 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture
2015	Early Childhood Education and Care Act; parents/guardians are expected to enrol their child to pre-primary education; despite this obligation, there is no system of sanctions if they do not.
2017	Revised curricular framework for early childhood education and care comes into effect

**Sources:** Ministry of Education and Culture & Finnish National Board of Education 2016.  
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.

## Current challenges for the system of Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland

Country expert assessment by Eeva-Leena Onnismaa

Since the transfer from the social welfare system to the education sector in 2013, the Finnish ECEC system is in quest of a new direction. Moreover, the law reform of 2015 and the curriculum reform of 2016 have paved the way for future developmental tasks. According to the *Roadmap on the development of early childhood education for 2017–2030\**, the main initial challenge is to increase the level of participation in early childhood education. The participation rate in ECEC in Finland has remained low compared with other Nordic countries and the next step will be to provide ECEC free of charge for 5-year olds, which will be piloted in cooperation with municipalities.

The second challenge relates to developing the staffing structures in ECEC centres as well as improving the skills of the personnel as whole. The main bulk of ECEC staff in Finland (80%) has a background in social welfare and health care. According to the proposal introduced in the *Roadmap*, at least 40% (minimum) of centre staff should be fully qualified ECEC teachers (Kindergarten Teachers) while the remaining 60% (maximum) would comprise Social Welfare Workers and Nursery Nurses. The proposal will not lead to a sudden change in the staffing structures be-

cause all employees in ECEC centres have job security. However, the proposal shows the desired direction, even if changes are likely to be moderate in the short run. Despite this, the trade unions representing the social welfare and the health care sectors have been resisting the proposal, and it remains to be seen whether policy makers and politicians will have the courage to transform it into practice.

**Source:** \*Ministry of Education and Culture 2017.

## Demographic data

### Total population

In 2016, the population of Finland totalled 5,487,308, marking a steady rise over the past 20 (5,098,754 in 1995, 5,236,611 in 2005).

### Children under age 7

Since compulsory schooling begins at age 7 in Finland, data in the following section will refer to children up to age 7 (and not only up to age 6, as in the other sections).

In 2016, 3.1% of the total population in Finland were children under 3 years of age, and 7.2% were children under age 7. Since the national statistics and the Eurostat totals differ somewhat, both are included in *Table 3*. The discrepancies can perhaps be explained by different cut-off dates during 2016.

*Table 3*

**Finland: Proportion of children under age 7 in the total population, 2016**

Age	No. of children (Eurostat)	No. of children (Statistics Finland)
Under 1 year	55,560	53,155
1-year olds	58,008	55,856
2-year olds	59,050	58,331
<b>Total under 3-year olds</b>	<b>172,618</b>	<b>167,342</b>
3-year olds	60,615	59,315
4-year olds	61,145	60,880
5-year olds	62,436	61,373
6-year olds	62,095	62,645
<b>Total 3- to under 7-year olds</b>	<b>246,291</b>	<b>244,213</b>
<b>Total 0- to under 7-year olds</b>	<b>418,909</b>	<b>411,555</b>

The relative share of children under the age of 3 and under 7 years of age have been consistently slightly higher than the EU average over the past 20 years.

Table 4

Finland: Children under 7 years of age – relative share in total population compared with EU average, 1995 to 2016, in %\*

Age	1995	Ø EU15 <sup>1</sup>	2005	Ø EU25	2016	Ø EU28
Under 3 years	3.8	3.3	3.3	3.1	3.1	3.0
3 to under 6 years	5.1	4.7	4.4	4.2	4.5	4.2
0 to under 7 years	8.9	8.0	7.6	7.3	7.6	7.2

\* own calculations, deviations due to roundings

Sources: Eurostat 2017a

\*Statistics Finland 2016.

## Single households with children under age 6

In 2015, almost all households (92.6%) in Finland with children under 6 years of age were couple households. Single parent households accounted for less than 2%, and these were almost without exception single mother households.

Table 5

Finland: Households with children under age 6, 2015

Household type	Total households	Total households in per cent*
All households	502,000	
Couple households	464,800	92.6
Other household type	28,100	5.6
Single households, total	9,200	1.8
Single households, women	8,400	1.7
Single households, men	800**	0.2

\* own calculations, \*\* data computed

Source: Eurostat 2017e.

## Employment rates of parents with children under age 6

In 2015, the labour market participation of men in Finland (aged 15 to 64 years) was 69.3%, and the employment rate of women was only slightly lower at 67.7%. In the same year, 60.1% of all women and nearly 90% of all men with children under 6 years of age were in employment. The relative share of mothers in the labour market is slightly below the EU average, whereas the proportion of working fathers is slightly above the EU average (see Table 6).

<sup>1</sup> The 1995 data are for the EU15 countries at the time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK); the 2005 data (EU25) also include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2014 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR.

Table 6

**Finland: Employment rates of parents with children under age 6 compared with other EU states, 2005-2016**

	Year	Mothers in per cent	Fathers in per cent
Finland	2005	61.0	91.0
	2010	61.2	91.9
	2015	60.1	89.3
European Union	EU15 – 2005	56.2	90.0
	EU27 – 2010	58.2	86.6
	EU28 - 2015	61.0	87.3
Highest rate of employment	2005	Slovenia – 76.8	Cyprus – 95.3
	2010	Slovenia – 76.7	Netherlands – 93.5
	2015	Sweden – 78.9	Malta/Czech Republic – 93.0
Lowest rate of employment	2005	Malta – 29.3	Bulgaria – 72.4
	2010	Hungary – 32.7	Latvia – 74.8
	2015	Hungary – 38.8	Bulgaria – 77.3

**Sources:** Eurostat 2017b.  
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.

**Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>2</sup>**

In 2015, 15.4% of children under 6 years of age were at risk of poverty or social inclusion. This positions Finland well under the EU average of 24.7% for this age-group. In terms of the total population in Finland, 16.8% were at risk of poverty or social inclusion.

**Source:** Eurostat 2017d.

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<sup>2</sup> 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At\\_risk\\_of\\_poverty\\_or\\_social\\_exclusion\\_\(AROPE\)](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Glossary:At_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion_(AROPE))

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