

Bernard van Leer Foundation (2008) 'The transition to child care', in Early Childhood Matters nr. 110 (June), interview and summary conducted by Andrew Wright. The Hague, The Netherlands: BvLF

The following is a condensation of Report Card 8, The Child care Transition, prepared by *Early Childhood Matters*¹. It inevitably cannot do justice to nuances contained in the full report, and should not be taken as indicating what the Innocenti Research Centre would wish to emphasise.

The great change

The Report Card starts by calling attention to the “great change” now occurring in the way in which children are being brought up in the world’s economically advanced countries: “Today’s rising generation in the countries of the OECD is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of their early childhoods not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of childcare.”

The neuroscience revolution

While this “Child care Transition” gathers pace, a “parallel revolution” is underway in neuroscientific research, increasing our understanding of the importance of early childhood. Important concepts to emerge from this research include:

- the sequence of ‘sensitive periods’ in brain development
- the importance of ‘serve and return’ relationships with carers
- the role of love as a foundation for intellectual as well as emotional development
- the fostering of the child’s growing sense of agency
- the ways in which the architecture of the developing brain can be disrupted by stress
- the critical importance of early interactions with family members and carers in the development of stress management systems

Neuroscience “is beginning to confirm and explain the inner workings of what social science and common experience have long maintained – *that loving, stable, secure, stimulating and rewarding relationships with family and caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for almost all aspects of a child’s development.*”

The potential for good

The childcare transition brings an enormous potential for good. Children can benefit from interaction with other children and with childcare professionals; their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development can be enhanced. Childcare can help immigrant children with integration and language skills, and can erode one of the last great obstacles to equality of opportunity for women.

Most importantly, early childhood education and care offers “a rare opportunity to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage on the futures of many millions of children” by extending the benefits of good quality child early education and care to all children.

The potential for harm

But the potential for harm in the childcare transition is equally evident. For babies and infants, a

¹ The summary has been prepared by Andrew Wright, an independent writer and editor

lack of close interaction and care with parents can result in sub-optimal cognitive and linguistic development, and long-term effects which may include depression, withdrawal, inability to concentrate and other forms of mental ill-health.

“Concern has also been expressed about whether childcare may weaken the attachment between parent and child, and whether it may not be putting at risk the child’s developing sense of security and trust in others. Doubts have also been raised about possible long term effects on psychological and social development, and about whether the rise of childcare may be associated with a rise in behavioural problems in school-age children.” The most important generalisation to be made is that “the younger the child and the longer the hours-per-week spent in childcare the greater the risk.”

The need for monitoring

Most OECD governments have formulated policies and invested in early childhood education and care. The approaches, however, vary from country to country: “In some, early childhood services are almost as well-established and well-funded as primary schools. In others, they are often muddled in purpose, uneven in access, patchy in quality, and lacking systematic monitoring of access, quality, child-to-staff ratios, or staff training and qualification.”

OECD governments have the “clear responsibility” to monitor the childcare transition. “In fields such as health care, employment law, and the education of older children, common standards have demonstrated a potential to stimulate and support sustained progress.”

The Report Card proposes ten benchmarks as “an initial step towards an OECD-wide monitoring of what is happening to children in the childcare transition” and applies them to 24 OECD countries plus Slovenia. There is an “inevitable crudeness” about these benchmarks as they can only use the limited data that is available, and the Report Card is careful to express caveats about their limitations. They were drawn up in consultation with academic experts and government officials from different countries, and each represents “a pairing of an indicator with a suggested value”.

The ten benchmarks

The benchmarks fall under the broad headings of policy framework (1 and 2), access (3 and 4), quality (5, 6, 7 and 8), and supporting context (9 and 10), the latter two being designed to acknowledge and reflect wider social and economic factors critical to the efficacy of early childhood services.

1. A minimum entitlement to paid parental leave

Adequate parental leave helps “to create the conditions for the constant, intimate, reliable, reassuring, one-to-one interaction with parents that all infants need” and sidesteps the “enormous practical and financial difficulties in recruiting, training, remunerating, retaining, and supervising the large numbers of skilled staff that would be needed to guarantee adequate care and stimulation for the under ones”.

This benchmark, a year at half salary (two weeks of parental leave especially reserved for fathers), is met by 6 of the 25 countries.

2. A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children

Different countries have different ideas of what constitutes quality: “In France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for example, early childhood education and care tends to be seen

primarily as preparation for success in school. In countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, more ambitious aims are being embraced.”

Such fundamental differences make comparisons hard, so the benchmark proposes a relatively low bar of the existence of a national plan. 19 of the 25 countries have one.

3. A minimum level of childcare provision for under-threes

Difficult questions are subsumed into this and the following benchmark. Should services be universal or targeted at the poor? Should they be state-run or privately provided? The Report Card advises “universal services, but with flexible financing systems that can give priority to the disadvantaged” and notes that “significant public subsidy, supervision, and support is necessary if services of the right quality are to be made available to all, and if priority is to be given to disadvantaged and at-risk children”.

The benchmark chosen – publicly-subsidised and regulated childcare for 25% of under-threes – is intended to reflect the ideal of all children being looked after at home for the first 12 months followed by “the option of gradually introducing children to subsidised, high quality childcare until the age when formal schooling begins”. It is met by just over half of the countries.

4. A minimum level of access for four year-olds

This is the age when “the benefits of pre-school are not in doubt”. The benchmark of 80% enrolment is met by 15 of the 25 countries.

5. A minimum level of training for all staff

Access is no use without quality, and the next three benchmarks seek ways of measuring “known pre-conditions of quality – principally the availability of sufficient numbers of well-trained, well-supervised, and well-remunerated early childhood professionals”. The picture is not encouraging: “In many countries, childcare professionals stand at the bottom of the wages ladder and have little in the way of either job security or opportunity for career development.”

The fifth benchmark is that 80% of staff who work regularly with young children have had a basic level of training. “[I]t is significant, and disturbing, that only 17 of the 25 OECD countries surveyed were able to measure up to this relatively undemanding benchmark.”

6. A minimum proportion of staff with higher level education and training

The Report Card draws attention to the “dangerously out of date” attitude that less training is needed for looking after younger children, and proposes “improvements in pay and conditions” and “integrating early childhood care into the wider teaching and caring professions” as obvious steps to counter this public attitude.

20 out of 25 countries meet the benchmark of a minimum of 50% of staff having at least three years of tertiary education.

7. A minimum staff-to-children ratio

Smaller groups “make it possible to plan activities that are more stimulating and more attuned to each child’s interests and stage of development”. 12 of 25 countries meet the benchmark of one member of staff to every 15 four-to-five year-olds, and a maximum group size of 24.

8. A minimum level of public funding

The governments of OECD countries are currently spending an average of 1.0% of GDP on early childhood services – and the evidence suggests this must double to meet minimum standards. “Only six OECD countries meet eight or more of the benchmarks and they are the same six countries that top the table of government expenditures on early childhood services (Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Finland, France and Norway)”.

9. A low level of child poverty

It is “a consistent finding of research, in many different countries, that poverty in childhood is associated with negative outcomes in adolescent and adult life. More than any other variable, it is low family income that is the most reliable predictor of educational, psychological, and behavioural problems.”

10 out of 25 countries meet the benchmark of child poverty being below 10%.

10. Universal outreach

Extending the benefits of high quality early childhood education and care to all “could be and should be a manageable ideal as the child care transition unfolds.” But the “greater likelihood – and the currently prevailing pattern in many OECD countries – is that the transition to childcare will sharpen existing inequalities.” As a proxy for this benchmark, the Report Card uses the universality of outreach of child health services.

Ranking the countries

Overall, Sweden tops the table by meeting all 10 of the benchmarks, followed closely by Iceland which meets nine, and by Denmark, Finland, France, and Norway which meet eight. Only three countries – Australia, Canada and Ireland – meet fewer than three.

Going forward

The Report Card calls for “essential data on early childhood services to be included in standardised data sets. Without definitions there can be no measurement; without measurement there can be no data; without data there can be no monitoring; and without monitoring there can be neither evidence-based policy, effective advocacy, or public accountability.”

It does not propose outcome indicators, but expresses the hope of working towards “a widely agreed means of measuring the extent of the disparities between children’s abilities *at the point of entry into the formal education system*. It would then be possible, in principle, to measure the overall efficacy of early childhood services by the extent to which they succeed in reducing such disparities.”

Political feasibility

Is doubling the amount spent on early childhood services a politically feasible goal? Encouraging factors include the large and growing public demand for high quality services, and “widespread recognition that many of the social, educational and behavioural problems that affect the quality of life in the economically developed nations have their origins in poor parenting and disadvantaged backgrounds.”

With increasing knowledge about early childhood, “there is today no convincing reason for spending less on early childhood education and care than on schools and teachers for older children.”

A high-stakes gamble

In conclusion, the Report Card describes the childcare transition across the industrialised world as “a revolution in how the majority of young children are being brought up. And to the extent that this change is unplanned and unmonitored, it could also be described as a high-stakes gamble with today’s children and tomorrow’s world.”

It points out the “clear danger that the potential benefits of early childhood education will be reserved for children from better-off and better-educated families while the potential for harm will be visited mainly on children from disadvantaged homes.” The childcare transition could become “a new and potent source of inequality. If this is allowed to happen, an historic opportunity will be lost.”