

PRESS RELEASE

Launch of the Report Card 8:
The Childcare Transition
A League Table on Early Childhood Education and Care in Advanced Countries

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Good potential of early childhood education and care should not be compromised by poor quality services, according to a new UNICEF study

Florence, 11 December 2008 – A far-reaching change is coming over childhood in the world's richest countries, says a study released today by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy. According to the *Innocenti Report Card 8*, "The Childcare Transition", a majority of the rising generation in economically advanced societies is now spending a significant part of childhood in out-of-home childcare. Almost 80% of the three-to-six year-olds in rich countries are in some form of early childhood education and care. For the under threes, the proportion is 25%, rising to more than 50% in individual OECD countries.

In the last decade many countries have also begun to see sharp increases in the numbers of the children under the age of one year being cared for outside the home.

In part, these changes reflect new opportunities for women's employment outside the home. But in part, also, they reflect new necessities. And the poorer the family, the greater is the pressure to return to work as soon as possible after a birth - often to unskilled, low-paid jobs.

At the same time as this change is advancing across the economically developed world, progress in the scientific understanding of early brain development is confirming that the quality of care and interaction in the earliest months and years of a child's life are critical for almost all aspects of a child's development. Taken together, says the report, these two developments mean that the child care transition carries with it the potential both for great benefit and great harm.

Poor quality child care, continues the report, may result in weak foundations and shaky scaffolding for future learning, and what is true of cognitive and linguistic skills is also true of psychological and emotional and development.

"High quality early childhood education and care has a huge potential to enhance children's cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development," says Marta Santos Pais, Director of UNICEF IRC. "It can help boost educational achievement, limit the early establishment of disadvantage, promote inclusion, be an investment in good citizenship, and advance progress for women".

Some OECD countries, says the report, have engaged closely with the childcare issue, pursuing policies designed to realize the potential benefits. In others, out-of-home child care is proceeding in an ad hoc way with less assurance of quality.

Drawing on academic and governmental expertise, *Report Card 08* proposes ten benchmarks by which progress in early childhood education and care might be monitored and compared across the countries of the OECD.

"The proposed benchmarks should be regarded as a first step towards establishing a set of minimum standards to facilitate good early childhood outcomes," said Marta Santos Pais.

At present, only Sweden meets all 10 of the suggested benchmarks, followed closely by Iceland which meets nine, and by Denmark, Finland, France, and Norway which meet eight. These are the same six countries that top the table of government expenditures on early childhood services.

Many other OECD countries will need to at least double current levels of expenditure on early childhood services, concludes the report, if minimum acceptable standards are to be met.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

Note to Editors

The Report Card series present 'league tables' on aspects of child wellbeing in the world's most advanced economies (countries that are members of the OECD) seeking to stimulate debates through comparisons of what has actually been achieved by one or more countries.

Report Card no. 8 complements research presented in Report Card 6 and Report Card 7 dedicated to monitoring different aspects of child well-being and of child poverty in rich countries.

Embargoed media materials and copies of the Report Card in English, French, Spanish and Italian are available from the Centre's Innocenti Newsroom:
<http://www.unicef-irc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>

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