

Accessing childcare: Parents' logistical challenges and gender equality

openaccessgovernment.org/article/accessing-childcare-parents-logistical-challenges-and-gender-equality/168525

20 October 2023

Prof Ingela Naumann from the University of Fribourg, explains why reducing parents' logistical challenges in coordinating work and childcare matters for gender equality

Over the last two decades, we have seen an extensive expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services across the countries of the OECD.

A novel and ground-breaking consensus amongst policymakers and society had emerged by the beginning of the 21st century that ECEC is an essential pillar of our knowledge-based economies (see, e.g. European Commission 2018): they benefit children by fostering good child development – if the provided services are of good quality – thus supporting positive life courses and productivity of future generations; they help parents to remain active in the labour market, thus contributing to the prevention of family/child poverty and, again, boosting productivity.

And, not least, they support gender equality by giving women the choice to both be mothers and have a job, which in turn has positive effects on the social and economic well-being of societies.

The Nordic countries have shown the way on this for some time, demonstrating how a concern for gender equality and the reconciliation of family life and work, for example, through universal and affordable ECEC, go hand in hand with economic prosperity. Expanding the number of ECEC places should solve many problems straightforwardly. Or so it would seem.

Access to childcare

In the mid-2010s, a public debate arose in the UK on the costs and “ineffectiveness” of the considerable childcare expansion efforts the UK Government had undertaken. The Government had invested £800 million a year in the expansion of free ECEC places for three and four year-olds, and yet, this had only helped a modest 12,000 more mothers into employment (Naumann 2015).

What had happened? Did mothers not want to work? Did families not wish to send their children to nursery? According to various official surveys and other research, the opposite seems to be the case (e.g., DfE 2023). However, the new ECEC places were unavailable where nor when working parents needed them.

The universal ECEC policy of 15 hours of free early education in England and the other UK nations at the time seemed generous; it matched that of Sweden, which also has a similar policy of free part-time ECEC. However, in the UK at the time, this entitlement was in most ECEC facilities to be spread out over the week; thus, while helping reduce childcare costs, the part-time ECEC entitlement was ill-suited as an employment policy.

Someone had to drop off the child and pick them up again a few hours later, meaning working parents had to devise complex childcare arrangements involving other childcare providers or informal networks (grandparents!).

Not all families could afford to pay for additional childcare – which is very expensive in the UK compared to other OECD countries – nor did all have family or friends nearby to help out. This prevented many parents from taking up employment despite the hailed ECEC expansion.

A key issue is that it is insufficient to build more childcare facilities or offer free ECEC entitlements. What is often overlooked is the logistical challenges families must overcome in their daily lives to combine work and care responsibilities: coordinating between working time requirements of employers and opening hours of childcare facilities and schools, and navigating distance and transport between home, workplace, childcare and other locations.

When the care arrangements become too complex, this creates high barriers for parents, particularly mothers, to enter the labour market (Naumann et al. 2017).

Reducing families' logistical challenges

Here is a second important point: reducing families' logistical challenges in combining work with childcare is important for gender equality. International research across different countries has shown that it is predominantly women who make the daily journeys between home, care/school and work for drop-offs and pickups.

These logistical challenges often prevent mothers from working full-time, leaving many trapped in (low skill) part-time jobs that can fit around childcare and school opening hours or prevent them from entering the labour market altogether (Naumann et al. 2017).

ECEC policy in the UK

In the UK nations, over the last decade, ECEC policy has advanced in many positive ways: in Scotland, the ECEC entitlement has been extended to 30 hours; in England, working parents are now able to access the free entitlement more flexibly to suit better their work requirements, and it is also intended to expand this to 30 hours in the future.

In both UK nations, childcare strategies are underway to further expand the ECEC entitlement to one and two year-olds to support working parents. A key logistical challenge, however, seems set to remain: a 30-hour ECEC entitlement only really matches part-time work for parents – short part-time work at that, if we consider the time parents need for their daily commutes between work, care and school places.

Opening hours aggravate the situation: in Scotland, for example, most three and four year-olds attend nursery schools or nursery classes for their ECEC entitlement. These follow the school day, meaning children must be dropped off around 9 a.m. and picked up around 3 p.m., and there is no provision during school holidays.

Finding employers willing to accept the working hours of their employees constrained by these daily timetables would seem difficult. Thus, the logistical challenges for working parents to find additional childcare around the “school day”, either via alternative formal childcare settings or informal care, is still there – as is the pressure on mothers to adjust their career aspirations to part-time jobs that fit around care/school hours.

ECEC policy in Sweden

Let's turn our attention back to Sweden, considering there exists a similar free part-time ECEC policy as in England. Why are mothers' employment rates in Sweden consistently higher than in the UK? A reason for this is that the Swedish ECEC system differs in key aspects from the UK-nations: the universal accessibility of ECEC.

When Swedes speak about their “universal preschool,” they don't primarily think of the free (part-time) early education for three to five year-olds (compulsory school age in Sweden is six) but refer to the entitlement of all children from age one to a full day, all year round place in a day care centre if their parents are in employment. Early education and childcare are fully integrated in Sweden, meaning all children from ages one to five attend the same ECEC setting.

The “universal” character of Swedish ECEC stems from the fact that most Swedish preschool children attend ECEC and do so full-time. This full-time provision considerably reduces logistical challenges for parents in coordinating work and care arrangements. The 15-hour free entitlement is an additional element of the Swedish ECEC system to allow children whose parents are in education or are looking for a job to benefit from early education.

In addition, while childcare is not free of charge in Sweden, it is heavily subsidised and parental fees are capped, with fees set to a maximum 3% of household income for one child, 2% for the second and 1% for the 3rd child, respectively.

An important lesson from this comparison is that ECEC places must be available, affordable and logistically accessible to enable parents to master the daily coordination of different timetables, locations and distances of workplace, care and school. The simpler and the more comprehensive the ECEC setup, the easier it gets for parents, particularly mothers, to combine their care responsibilities with gainful employment.

Closing remarks on ECEC systems

Policy design thus matters for gender equality: ECEC systems that provide integrated services without the need to “relocate” children during the day, with full-day and year-round opening hours, and that are located at accessible commuting routes for families can help reduce logistical challenges for families and thereby support gender equality.

References

1. Department for Education (2023) “Childcare and early years survey of parents”, ONS.
2. European Commission, (2018), “Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them”, Publications Office, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/20810>
3. Naumann, I. K. (2015) ‘Universal childcare’ and maternal employment: The British and the Swedish story’. in L Foster et al. (eds), In Defence of Welfare 2. Policy Press, pp. 79.
4. Naumann, I.K. et al. (2017) “Access to Childcare in Europe: Parents’ Logistical Challenges in Cross-National Perspective”, Social Policy and Administration, 51(7): pp. 1367-1385.

Please Note: This is a Commercial Profile



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).