

Does early childhood education promote parental wellbeing?

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Background: Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one of the most important services for children and their parents. It is often seen as social investment that promotes children's development and learning, as well as mitigates inequalities between families and children, and promotes gender equality by supporting the reconciliation of paid employment and care responsibilities of parents of young children (Alasuutari et al 2022). Parental and child wellbeing are interrelated: the challenges in parental wellbeing such as risk of poverty often mean lower wellbeing of their children (e.g. Paananen et al 2012; Karhula et al 2017). Due to public provision of high quality and affordable ECEC in the Nordic countries, most children under school age attend the ECEC after the parental leave period ends. There are however differences between the countries: the participation rate of children in ECEC has during the past decades been lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. Generally, it is assumed that the availability of high-quality and affordable ECEC services supports reconciliation of work and family life and alleviates parents' financial burden and stress (Collins et al. 2018).

Research questions and hypothesis: We examine 1) is there an association between children's participation in ECEC and parental wellbeing and 2) does the association differ across countries and between mothers and fathers? We hypothesize that children's participation in ECEC is positively associated with parental wellbeing, particularly for mothers. However, in Finland, where taking care of children at home is more prevalent than in other Nordic countries, we expect the association to be smaller.

Data: We use the European Living Conditions Survey (EU-Silc) 2018 data for four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (N=1443). We include all households with one or two adults where the youngest child is under 3 years old. The 2018 data include a module on subjective wellbeing. We use a multidimensional approach to parental wellbeing and include in our analysis general mental health (MHI-5 measure), satisfaction in personal relationships, financial situation and time use, and overall satisfaction in life.

Methods: The analysis includes descriptive analysis and regression analysis on the association between children's participation in ECEC and parental wellbeing for the different dimensions of wellbeing. The analysis is run separately for mothers and fathers. Child's participation in ECEC is used as a dichotomous variable. The socioeconomic background variables include parental age, education, current economic activity, immigrant status, single parenthood, income, presence of other under 6-year-old children in the household, and place of residence.

Preliminary results: Our descriptive findings show that parental wellbeing measured by mental health is fairly high in all four countries. In addition, the level of mental health does not vary greatly between those mothers and fathers whose child participates in ECEC and those whose does not. Similarly, we find only small differences in overall satisfaction in life and satisfaction in household's financial situation. However, more variation between groups may be found in the social dimensions of wellbeing, satisfaction in personal relationships and time-use. Contrary to our hypothesis, it seems that in Denmark and Sweden, mothers whose

children attend ECEC are less satisfied with their personal relationships compared to mothers whose children are cared for at home. For fathers, the opposite is the case. In Norway and Finland, we do not find such inter-group differences.

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