



FINNISH EDUCATION  
EVALUATION CENTRE

# Quality indicators for early childhood education and care

SUMMARIES 16:2019

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# INTRODUCTION

This publication presents the quality indicators for early childhood education and care. It is an executive summary of the document titled *Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care* published by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre in 2018<sup>1</sup>. This summary presents the quality indicators and a quality model for Finnish early childhood education and care.

The indicators are underpinned by an extensive review of research in ECEC quality. The research review and the more detailed justifications for the indicators can be found in the document *Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care*. <https://karvi.fi/en/early-childhood-education/>

The concepts related to the quality of Finnish early childhood education and care and quality evaluation are consistent with international and, in particular, European ECEC quality terminology, which is why the term quality indicator is used in this context. Other concepts corresponding to a quality indicator could include the term quality criterion used in basic education.

The quality indicators describe the characteristics of high-quality ECEC. They are based on extensive Finnish and international research evidence, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care,<sup>2</sup> and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>3</sup>.

**The purpose of the quality indicators is to offer ECEC organisers and private service providers clear, nationally consistent descriptions of what should happen in early childhood education and care to ensure that it would be of a high quality and promote a child's best interests. The indicators thus lay the foundation for consistent practices and principles at the national level, following which early childhood education and care can be evaluated and, consequently, developed.**

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1 Vlasov et al. 2018

2 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018

3 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2018

# KEY CONCEPTS





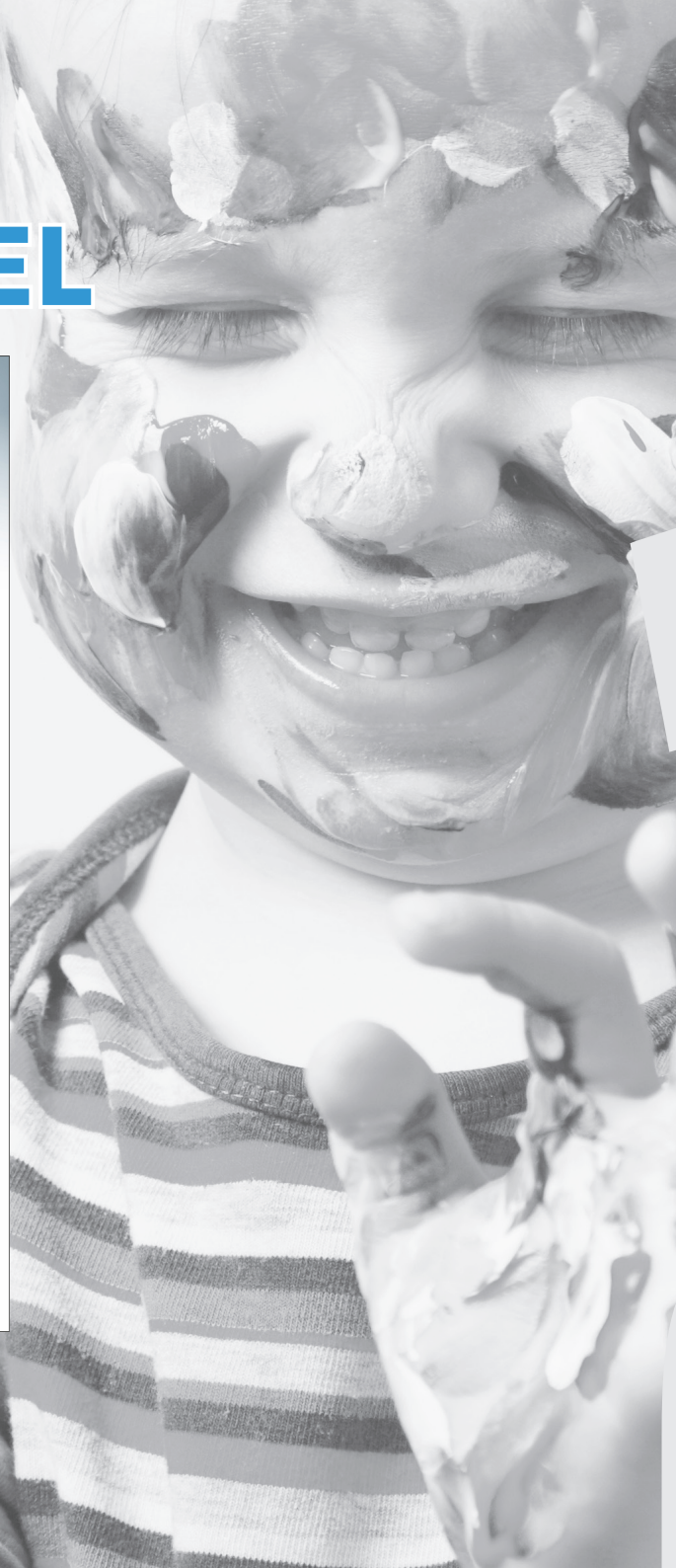
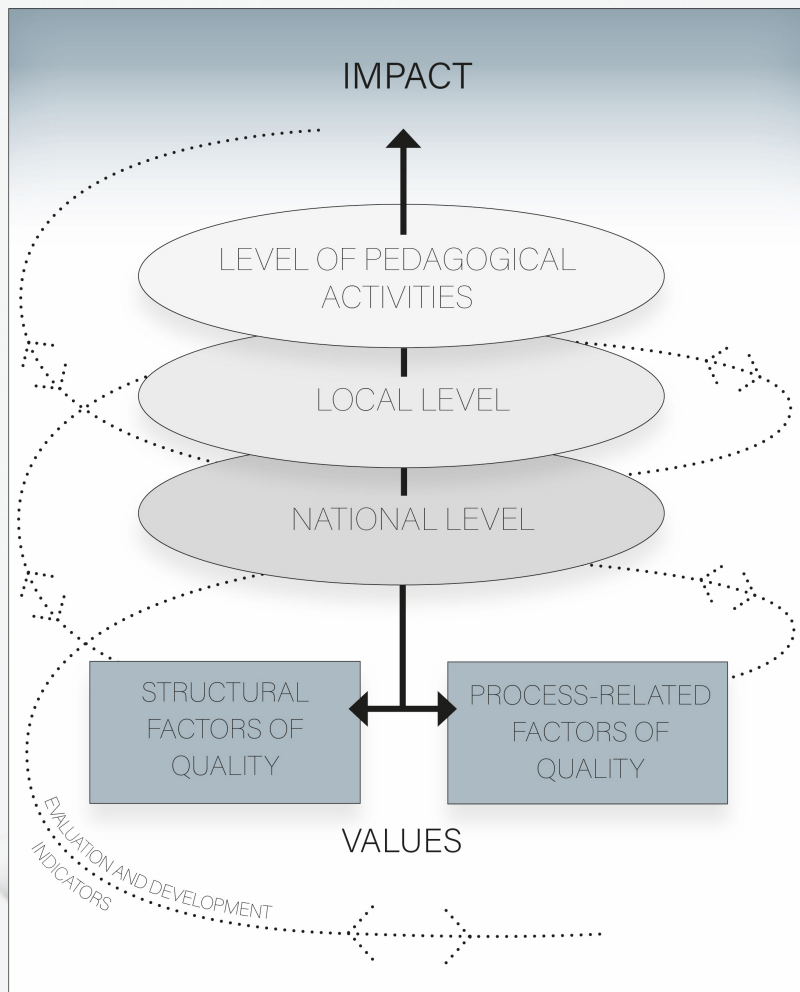
**An indicator** is a quality declaration, or a concrete and verifiable description of the essential and desirable properties of high-quality early childhood education and care. An indicator may describe an object's property, status or level. Quality indicators lay the foundation for consistent practices and principles at the national level, following which early childhood education and care can be evaluated and, consequently, developed. However, an indicator is not an evaluation phrase or an evaluation instrument as such. The grounds for evaluating quality, which are termed criteria, can be derived from the indicators.

**Criteria** are attributes that define indicators in greater detail or properties that differentiate them. Criteria are clear claims and questions that describe the practice. Criteria may also describe the level of the issue to be evaluated. Criteria can be used to verify and examine how well the indicators are implemented in the activities.

More detailed definitions for the indicators can be found in the document Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care.



# QUALITY MODEL





The model shown on the next page can be used to structure the evaluation and improvement of ECEC quality.

The definition of ECEC quality is tied to values which indicate *what* early childhood education and care aims for and *why* something is considered important.

**Structural factors of quality** are marginal conditions related to organising early childhood education and care. They include the curriculum directing ECEC, personnel training, working time structures, the structure and size of child groups, and the facilities. The structural factors of quality are linked to such aspects as *who* is responsible for ECEC activities, *where* ECEC activities take place, and *what* type of a setting is created for the activities.

**Process-related factors of quality** describe the unit's pedagogical operating culture, which is directly linked to the child's experiences. Process-related factors include interactive relationships between the children, adults, guardians and personnel as well as pedagogical activity in child groups. Other process-related factors are leadership, planning, implementation, evaluation and development of pedagogy and the different parties' experiences of participation. In other words, the process-related factors of quality describe *how* the objectives and content specified for early childhood education and care are realised in practice.

ECEC quality is composed of the joint impact of these factors, which should be regarded as mutually complementary. They are realised at the national and local level and the level of pedagogical activity.

The different quality factors and the three levels (*national, local and pedagogical activity level*) at which early childhood education and care are regulated are linked to the type of *impact* high-quality ECEC has.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY







Structural factors provide a framework for high-quality activities. They set conditions for how positive consequences and impacts of early childhood education and care can be realised.

Structural quality indicators should be examined at the national and local level and the level of pedagogical activity. These levels are shown underneath each structural factor.



# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**“Legislation creates the basic premises for early childhood education and care and its organisation by setting the objectives and several obligatory structural marginal conditions for it. Legislation reflects societal values and choices, which influence the direction in which early childhood education and care is steered and developed.”**

# Legislation on early childhood education and care

## At the national level

1. ECEC legislation is developed ensuring that it secures the organisation, delivery, evaluation and development of high-quality early childhood education and care. The national-level statutes are understandable and comprehensive.
2. The staff-child ratio and the group size and structure specified in the legislation are based on research evidence and expert knowledge regarding ECEC quality and a child's development, and they enable the organisation of pedagogical activities in a manner that allows the achievement of the objectives set for early childhood education and care.
3. The staff qualification requirements laid down in legislation are based on the evolving competence requirements of early childhood education and care. Expert knowledge and research evidence are taken into account in the definition of the qualification requirements.
4. The legislation sets clear and comprehensible objectives, tasks and requirements for the different operating forms of early childhood education and care.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"The purpose of the adequacy, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood education and care is to guarantee children equal opportunities for participating in and benefiting from high-quality early childhood education and care, regardless of such reasons as gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person. It has been proven that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care has a positive link with children's cognitive development and later academic success, as well as with the development of social skills and skills of self-regulation."**

# Adequacy, availability, accessibility and inclusiveness of early childhood education and care

## At the national level

5. The national steering system safeguards every child's right to early childhood education and care. High-quality services implementing the principle of inclusiveness are available and accessible to all children.
6. The national steering system sets the policies for and safeguards the provision of support for individual development and learning, ensuring that each child receives the support they need.

## At the local level

7. ECEC organisers must ensure the availability and accessibility to all children of high-quality ECEC services in which the principle of inclusiveness is implemented.
8. Local ECEC services have been organised to safeguard the provision of support for development and learning, ensuring that each child receives the support they need. The support needed by a child is provided in the child's usual learning environment.

## At the level of pedagogical activities

9. The leader of the day-care centre ascertains every day that a sufficient number of staff as required by law and considering the number of children is present, ensuring that the children's safety and the permanence of interactive relationships can be guaranteed and the objectives set for early childhood education and care are reached.
10. ECEC staff ensure that all children can participate in all activities, regardless of their background and individual characteristics.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care directs the planning and delivery of ECEC through a shared goal-setting. Research indicates that using a curriculum in pedagogy has a positive impact on children's development and learning. The curriculum operates at multiple levels in Finnish early childhood education and care: as a national-level document, it provides the underlying framework and structure for the local and potential unit-level curricula, defining the key contents and perspectives of a child's ECEC plan."**

# Curriculum guiding early childhood education and care

## At the national level

- 11.** The organisation and delivery of ECEC is guided and regulated by a national-level curriculum that pays attention to children's holistic development, learning and wellbeing and pedagogy that promotes them. The curriculum concerns all children under the school age in all forms of ECEC.

## At the local level

- 12.** The locally prepared curriculum translates the national curriculum into concrete terms and serves as a tool for achieving the objectives set for early childhood education and care for the staff.
- 13.** The local curriculum is evaluated together with key stakeholders, including the children, guardians, decision-makers and partners.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**“Research has shown that ECEC staff’s higher level of education has, above all, a positive impact on the staff’s professional attitudes, knowledge and skills and, through them, potentially on children’s development or learning. The benefits of in-service training and support for professional competence are seen indirectly at the level of pedagogical activities, in particular.”**



# Staff's basic and in-service training and other competence development

## At the national level

14. The national steering system sets the policies for and promotes the implementation and development of the staff's basic training and methodical and continuous in-service training, ensuring that they meet the needs arising from the delivery of high-quality ECEC services.

## At the local level and the level of pedagogical activities

15. ECEC staff's in-service training and other development of professional competence are methodical and based on verified needs for competence development. Staff members are encouraged in pursuing in-service training, and opportunities for doing so are created.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**“Timely and comprehensive guidance and advice related to the ECEC service system for guardians can support children’s access to early childhood education and care, thus promoting equal access to the services. In the national context, the diversity of the ECEC service system and operating forms stresses the importance of guidance and counselling directed at guardians.”**

# Guidance and counselling related to ECEC for guardians

## At the local level

16. Comprehensive guidance and advice related to ECEC services are provided, ensuring that guardians are clearly informed of the ECEC operating forms, their characteristics and their missions.
17. Guidance and advice related to ECEC for guardians ensure that children's equal right to and possibilities for participating in early childhood education and care are realised. The child's right to ECEC is the primary grounds for providing advice and guidance.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"High-quality early childhood education and care and equal access to it may be guaranteed if the guidance, advice and oversight related to service provision and delivery are carried out regularly and comprehensively in different ECEC operating forms, both in the public and the private sector."**

# Guidance, advice and oversight related to ECEC services

## At the national level

- 18.** The national steering system sets the policies on the guidance of and advice provision for private early childhood education and care at the local level by clearly defining the private service provider's responsibilities and the municipal organiser's duties.

## At the local level

- 19.** Guidance and oversight of and advice provision for private ECEC services are implemented ensuring that the achievement of statutory and qualitative objectives set for early childhood education and care is secured in privately produced services.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"The adequacy, availability and accessibility of services have an indirect impact on children's vertical transitions (e.g. from home to ECEC, from ECEC to pre-primary education and further to basic education) and horizontal transitions (e.g. between day-care centre groups or different service forms) alike. From the perspective of children's wellbeing, growth and development, ECEC transitions should provide logical horizontal and vertical continuums. Smooth and well-planned transitions can further enhance the positive impacts of ECEC on children."**

# Uniform educational system and transitions

## At the national level

20. A uniform system of education and instruction extending from early childhood education and care to other levels of education ensures that transitions are smooth and secure the availability of equitable continuums on learning paths.

## At the local level

21. Children's transitions from home to early childhood education and care, within ECEC services, and further to pre-primary education and basic education are planned and carried out ensuring that the children's learning path is a smooth and equal continuum.

## At the level of pedagogical activities

22. The staff together with the children's guardians plan and implement effective practices that support the children's feeling of security and learning when they move from home care to early childhood education and care.
23. Together with other ECEC professionals, basic education professionals and guardians, the staff plan and implement effective practices that promote children's wellbeing and learning for transitioning between different ECEC forms or units or from ECEC and pre-primary education to basic education.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"Preconditions for the pedagogical development and continuous improvement of activities in ECEC include appropriate evaluation and development structures underpinning decision-making and development. ECEC organisers' and private service providers' quality management systems are a key element in evaluation and development structures and lay a foundation for conducting systematic evaluations."**



# Structures for evaluating and developing early childhood education and care

## At the national level

24. The entity of the national evaluation system produces relevant and comprehensive evaluation data. Evaluation is systematic and supports ECEC development and the achievement of the objectives set for ECEC at different levels.

## At the local level

25. ECEC organisers and private service providers have an evaluation system through which ECEC services and pedagogy can be developed.
26. Regardless of the forms and organisation methods of early childhood education and care, all parties to ECEC participate in the evaluation and development. This includes actors at the different levels of the organisation, the children and their guardians, and decision-makers.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"An effective leadership system fit for its purpose enables successful guidance of the organisation's development and any changes. ECEC organisers' and private service providers' individual strategies as well as leadership create important structures for not only the planning and implementation of activities but also the evaluation and development processes of pedagogy at different levels of the organisation."**

# ECEC leadership system

## At the local level

- 27.** The local level has a clear decision-making and leadership system, leadership structures and procedures for early childhood education and care. The leadership system supports the staff's pedagogical work and the children's wellbeing as well as ensures that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are achieved.
- 28.** Leadership in ECEC is based on evaluation, monitoring and anticipation data as well as expert knowledge and research-based evidence. The persons responsible for leadership in ECEC have sufficient expertise in early childhood education and care and leadership skills.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"The preconditions for achieving the objectives set for early childhood education and care in an ECEC unit include the staff's diverse professional competence and the allocation of sufficient resources for early childhood education and care. There must be a correlation between the objectives of ECEC, staff qualifications and professional competence."**

# Staff structure and resources reserved for ECEC

## At the local level

- 29.** To deliver early childhood education and care, sufficient personnel and financial resources are reserved and the personnel structure is planned to ensure that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are reached and that children's stable interaction relationships with the staff and their peers can be secured.

## At the level of pedagogical activities

- 30.** The personnel structure and numbers as well as the other resources in child groups are allocated to ensure that the objectives set for early childhood education and care are achieved and that children's stable interaction relationships with the staff and their peers can be secured.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**“Working time structures and planning contribute to the possibilities different professional groups among the staff have of delivering systematic early childhood education and care in line with their training. When drawing up and planning the working time structures in ECEC, it should be ensured that the staff’s tasks, duties and obligations are based on their professional training and competence rather than being assigned to a certain shift.”**

# Working time structures and planning in ECEC

## At the local level

- 31.** The policies and steering regarding working time structures, planning and arrangements ensure that the staff can carry out methodical ECEC work by optimally drawing on their professional training and competence.

## At the level of pedagogical activities

- 32.** The working time structures and working times enable the optimal utilisation of the staff's professional competence, taking the children's best interest into account.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**"The size of the child group or the adult-child ratio only are individual factors affecting quality, and in most cases, the combined effects with other structural factors are more important than the direct impacts. For example, a significant combined effect between ECEC staff's educational level, work experience and the quality of interaction has been observed: the higher the staff's educational level and the more work experience the staff had, the more smoothly organised and efficient the activities were. The research has also found that the larger the child groups are, the poorer the socio-emotional support provided by the staff and the organisation of the activities."**



# Child group structure and size

## At the local and pedagogical activity level

33. The structure and sizes of child groups are determined with the children's best interest and wellbeing and the promotion of learning as the primary guidelines.

# INDICATORS FOR STRUCTURAL QUALITY



**“Healthy and well-functioning facilities are the physical starting point for a high-quality learning environment. The functional characteristics of the facilities alone do not guarantee high-quality pedagogy, however, as pedagogical planning ultimately determines what shape the activities take and how the child experiences the activities in the facility.”**

# Learning environments of early childhood education and care

## At the local and pedagogical activity level

**34.** All ECEC learning environments are healthy, safe and diverse and promote learning.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY





Process-related factors of quality are the core functions of early childhood pedagogy with a direct link to the child's experiences. This is why the quality indicators associated with ECEC processes can only be evaluated at the level of pedagogical activities. However, ECEC organisers and private service providers should note that structural solutions and measures lay the foundation for the core functions of pedagogy. In other words, if there are shortcomings in the structures, the quality of the process is usually not high, either.



# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"The underlying values of and legislation on ECEC stress the importance of the interactive relationship between the child and the adult for the child's positive development and learning as well as the child's life here and now. The legislation also emphasises safe and stable interactive relationships. At the centre of child-adult interaction is the staff's sensitive manner of encountering the children in a group, noticing their emotional and cognitive needs, and meeting these needs responsively while taking the children's viewpoints and initiatives into account. By means of interaction, children's behaviour may also be supported constructively, and diverse support for their linguistic development may be offered. The quality of interaction constructed in this way has been found to have a positive impact on the development of children's social and academic skills and motivational factors. "**

# Staff-child interaction

1. Interaction is positive, caring, encouraging and gentle. The staff are committed to each child and the child group.
2. The staff interact reciprocally with the children in a manner compatible with the children's development, interests and learning capabilities.
3. The staff work sensitively, taking notice of the children's initiatives and responding to them in a manner that supports the children's participation and agency.
4. The staff's language use is as rich and diverse as possible taking the children's age and level of development into account. The staff adapt their language use to the child's world of experience, verbalise the activities, and encourage children to participate in daily linguistic interaction as permitted by the child's capabilities and skills.
5. The staff take all children in the group into consideration and understand the different ways in which the children express themselves.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**“Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development in early childhood education and care lay the foundation for the delivery of high-quality early childhood education and care. Pedagogically well-planned, diverse, and creative operating methods challenge and inspire children to learn. Documentation is required in order to evaluate and develop pedagogy. Pedagogical documentation of early childhood education and care is a process through which the activities are made visible and can be evaluated together with the staff and children. The evaluation of pedagogy focuses on the staff’s activities and ECEC quality experienced by the child.”**



# Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development

6. The staff are responsible for the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of activities in line with the curriculum in a manner that supports the children's learning and development.
7. The staff observe and document the children's daily lives in early childhood education and care regularly and systematically in order to understand the child's world of experience. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of the activities.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"Pedagogical activities are based on a systematic entity of education, instruction and care, at the core of which lies responding to children's basic needs and supporting their development, learning and wellbeing. The physical and psychological learning environment of ECEC and diverse activities carried out together by the staff and the children in it encourage the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express themselves, and it is developed further together with the children."**

# Pedagogical activities and learning environments

8. ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn.
9. The staff and the children carry out together versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts and cultural heritage that offer positive learning experiences for the children. The activities promote the achievement of objectives set for different areas of learning and transversal competence.
10. Children's individuality is accounted for, helping each child identify and find their strengths and interests.
11. Meals, rest periods, transitions, dressing and other basic activities are carried out with pedagogical goals in mind.
12. A child's individual needs for support are recognised. The staff assess the need for support together with the guardians, and if necessary, appropriate support is organised for a child in multidisciplinary cooperation.
13. The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express. The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interests, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn.
14. The staff organise the daily transitions to be flexible and consistent, ensuring that the daily routine as a whole supports the child's wellbeing and learning.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"Aspects stressed in ECEC leadership are understanding the basic mission of early childhood education and care and, based on this, putting the shared pedagogical view of the ECEC staff (team) into practice in early childhood education and care work as high-quality pedagogical activities. A clearly defined basic mission and striving for the objectives of ECEC through the means of shared leadership are characteristics of effective leadership. At the level of pedagogical activities, an ECEC teacher is responsible for their child group's pedagogy: its planning, goal-oriented implementation and evaluation. Studies also refer to this as teacher leadership; the preconditions for its realisation are effective organisation structures, a willingness to adopt shared leadership, and ECEC teachers' personal attitudes towards leading and developing their group's pedagogy."**

# Leadership at the level of pedagogical activities

15. The head of the ECEC unit is responsible for the goal-oriented and methodical leadership, evaluation and development of their units' pedagogy and the staff's opportunities for learning in their work. Pedagogical leadership is implemented with the support of ECEC teachers and ensuring the participation of the entire staff.
16. The ECEC teacher is responsible for planning the activities for the child group, achieving the objectives set for the activities, and the evaluation and development of the activities. The entire staff work together to plan, implement, evaluate and develop the pedagogical activities.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"Children's peer relationships and interaction with their friends are at the centre of the objectives of ECEC legislation, the shared underlying values and the delivery of early childhood education and care, and they have a significant intrinsic value for the children in the daily activities. Positive peer relationships and peer acceptance promote a child's social and emotional development and support the development of interaction skills. They may also be significant factors in protecting a child from exclusion."**

# Peer interaction and group atmosphere

17. The staff construct a positive learning environment for the children. The atmosphere of the group is safe, warm and caring, and it inspires learning.
18. The staff and the children form a community of learners together in which every child's meaningful participation in the activities is realised. The staff support the children's group activities through their guidance and example.
19. The staff build and guide the group's operating culture systematically, ensuring that it promotes, maintains and develops togetherness. The staff ensure that each child can feel they are members of the group and belong to the group. The staff support the children in establishing and maintaining versatile friendships.
20. The staff ensure that each child thrives in early childhood education and care. The children feel they are heard and valued just as they are.
21. The staff build and maintain in the group an atmosphere based on appreciating the children's individual differences and different cultures, religions and world views. The staff support children's plurilingualism in the group.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"The implementation of pedagogy in an ECEC unit depends on complex professional interaction between staff members. Staff-child interaction has been found to be of a higher quality at day-care centres where the operating culture is constructive and diverse and where the staff is offered sufficient opportunities for continuous professional development. An open operating culture, the professionals' good team work skills as well as the flexibility and support of administrative structures also have an influence on multidisciplinary cooperation and its effectiveness, the purpose of which is to create an extensive support network for the child's development."**



# Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation

- 22. The staff work towards professional interaction based on trust, appreciation and respect as part of the ECEC operating culture.
- 23. The ECEC staff recognise the different professional groups' professional duties, competence and responsibilities as part of the entity of ECEC work. The staff draw on different skills in ECEC work and its development.
- 24. The staff recognise their professional responsibilities and competence and those of the parties they work together with, and draw on them in multidisciplinary cooperation.

# INDICATORS FOR PROCESS QUALITY



**"The quality of ECEC processes is influenced by direct, trustful and equal interaction between ECEC staff and the children's guardians. In the best case, it may broaden both parties' horizons concerning education and development and serve as a link between early childhood education and care and the homes. A guardian's meaningful participation in their child's early childhood education and care may thus contribute to improving the quality of ECEC."**

# Interaction between staff and guardians

25. Educational cooperation starts from appreciation for the children and their guardians as well as an open, equal and trusting relationship. The interaction reflects respect for the guardians' knowledge of their children and for the staff's professional knowledge and competence.
26. Guardians' participation in planning, carrying out and evaluating early childhood education and care activities is enabled. Different forms and practices of educational cooperation are planned together with the guardians.

This summary is based on FINEEC's publication Vlasov, J., Salminen, J., Repo, L., Karila, K., Kinnunen, S., Mattila, V., Nukarinen, T., Parrila, S. & Sulonen, H. (2019). Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care. Publications 5:2019.



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