



FINNISH EDUCATION  
EVALUATION CENTRE

# SUMMARY: EVALUATION OF THE EXPERIMENT ON FREE OF CHARGE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR FIVE-YEAR-OLDS IN THE PERIOD 2018–2021



Julia Kuusiholma-Linnamäki | Anna Siippainen

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***Experiment on free of charge early childhood education and care for five-year-olds in the period 2018–2021***

Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government launched an experiment on organising free of charge early childhood education and care (ECEC) for five-year-olds for the period 2018–2020. Prime Minister Antti Rinne's Government and later Sanna Marin's Government continued the experiment until 31 July 2021. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the implementation of the experiment between 2018 and 2021.

The Ministry of Education and Culture set the following objectives for the experiment:


- to determine how free of charge ECEC affects the participation of five-year-olds in ECEC
- to determine how the experiment affects the participation of children younger than that in ECEC
- to determine the cost effects of free of charge ECEC
- to promote guardians' employment
- to determine and evaluate the operating models of ECEC and the current pre-primary education from the point of view of five-year-olds and to consider pedagogical solutions for the provision of free of charge ECEC or possibly extending pre-primary education to two years
- to develop service counselling in ECEC.

The Ministry of Education and Culture allocated central government compensation to the participating municipalities to cover the estimated reduction in the accrual fee revenue. All of the municipalities that applied into the experiment were included in all of the three phases. In the first phase, 20 per cent of the estimated reduction in the client fee revenue was compensated for to the municipalities ( $n = 19$ ) and 40 per cent in the second phase ( $n = 26$ ). In the third phase ( $n = 26$ ), the amount of the government transfer was increased to cover 79 per cent of the actual reduction in client fee revenue. Thirteen of the municipalities participating in the experiment participated in all of its three stages and 20 municipalities participated in one or two stages. Between 2018 and 2021, a total of 33 municipalities from Mainland Finland participated in the experiment (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Municipalities participating in the experiment on free of charge ECEC between 2018 and 2021 by experiment phase**

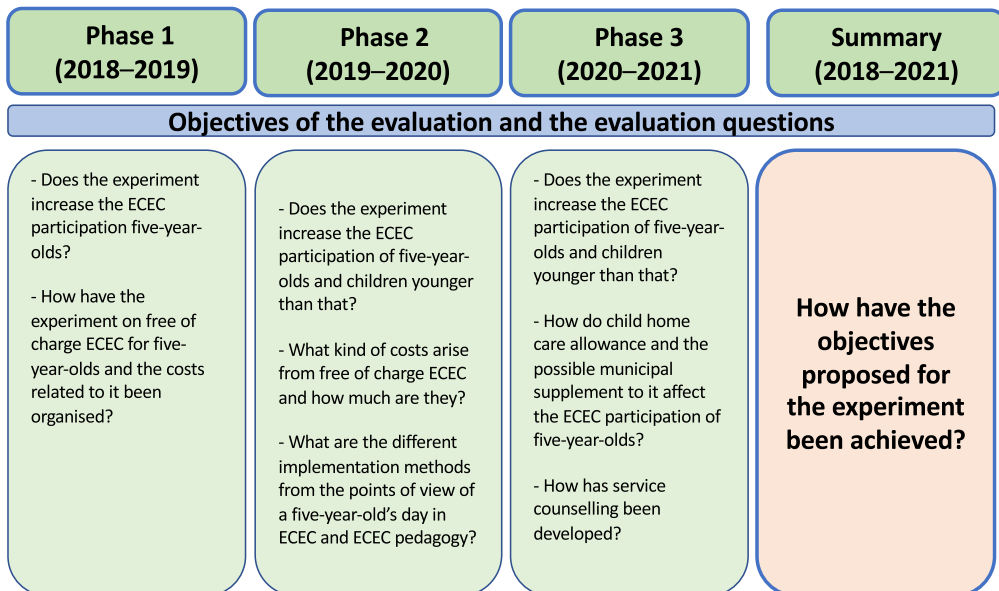
Municipality participating in the experiment	First phase (2018–2019)	Second phase (2019–2020)	Third phase (2020–2021)
Harjavalta	X	X	X
Helsinki	X	X	X
Kirkkonummi	X	X	X
Kitee	X	X	X
Kotka	X	X	X
Leppävirta	X	X	X
Miehikkälä	X	X	X
Oulu	X	X	X
Salo	X	X	X
Somero	X	X	X
Sonkajärvi	X	X	X
Turku	X	X	X
Virolahti	X	X	X
Espoo		X	X
Forssa	X		X
Halsua		X	X
Hämeenkyrö		X	X
Kempele	X	X	
Lahti		X	X
Laitila		X	X
Liperi	X		X
Mäntyharju	X	X	
Rusko		X	X
Tammela		X	X
Toivakka		X	X
Akaa			X
Iisalmi	X		
Joutsa		X	
Järvenpää		X	
Kauhajoki			X
Loviisa		X	
Rautavaara			X
Taivassalo	X		
<b>Municipalities in total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>26</b>





***Evaluation of the  
experiment on free of  
charge early childhood  
education and care  
for five-year-olds***

FINEEC has evaluated the implementation of the objectives set for the experiment in all of its three stages. During each phase of the experiment, changes that have taken place in children’s participation in ECEC have been monitored. In addition, some of the objectives set for the experiment have been highlighted in each year (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1. Implementation of the evaluation of the experiment on early childhood education and care in 2018–2021**

This report concentrates on the implementation of the objectives set for the experiment on free of charge ECEC in all of the three phases (Siippainen et al. 2019; Siippainen et al. 2020; Kuusiholma-Linnamäki et al. 2021). FINEEC examined the pedagogy in ECEC, especially the pedagogy for five-year-olds, and skills and art education in Finnish ECEC in a separate evaluation (Juutinen et al. 2021). This summary takes advantage of the report results in terms of the pedagogy for five-year-olds and the needs to develop it. In addition to what was mentioned above, the summary examines the participation rate of both five-year-olds and children younger than that in ECEC on the basis of a longitudinal setup. This was done so that it would already be possible to examine the ECEC participation rate approximately six months before the experiment on free of charge ECEC began in 2018 and monitor the participation rate and changes in it until the end of the experiment. Children's participation rates are examined in the period 2017–2020, using the last day of the year (31 December) as the point of measurement every year. Moreover, the summary also examines five-year-old children's mothers' employment rate by municipality. Inspections were made from the period 2017–2019, using the last day of the year as the point of measurement each year. Employment information for 2020 was not available when the mothers' employment analyses were conducted. At the end of the summary report, measures are recommended to promote ECEC participation and to develop the system of ECEC services.

A large, light blue number '3' is centered on the page, serving as a background for the text.

***Implementation of  
the evaluation***

The evaluation of the experiment on free of charge ECEC has been implemented in three phases<sup>1</sup>. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected for the evaluations in the different phases of the evaluation both from the guardians of five-year-olds and from municipal officeholders. In addition, the evaluation used already existing register data from Statistics Finland and the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela).

### 3.1 Surveys to municipalities in 2019, 2020 and 2021

The surveys aimed at municipalities were implemented in January and February 2019, 2020 and 2021. In each survey, the number of children registered in ECEC was requested approximately six months before the beginning of each experiment period (15 January), at the beginning of the experiment (15 September) and six months after its beginning (15 January). In the first phase of the experiment of free of charge ECEC, the survey was sent to the control municipalities ( $n = 20$ ) as well as to the municipalities participating in the experiment ( $n = 19$ ). In the second and the third phase of the experiment, the surveys were sent to all other municipalities in Mainland Finland as well as to the participating municipalities ( $n = 26$ ). In the second phase, the response rate in the survey to the municipalities was 91.9 per cent ( $n = 275$ ) and in the third phase, 96 per cent ( $n = 282$ ). In addition to questions related to the number of children, the municipalities were asked questions according to the varying themes of the evaluations.

### 3.2 Surveys to guardians in 2019 and 2021

During the evaluations of the first and the third phase, surveys aimed at guardians of five-year-olds were implemented. In the first phase, the survey was implemented with the guardians of children born in 2013 in the municipalities participating in the experiment ( $n = 19$ ) and in the control municipalities ( $n = 20$ ). In smaller municipalities, the survey was sent to all guardians of children belonging to the target group. In Helsinki, one third of the children in the age cohort were selected to the survey and in other large cities, one half. The survey could be completed in Finnish, Swedish and English. In the first phase, the survey to guardians was sent to 12,117 guardians of five-year-olds and responses were received from 2,292 families (response rate was 19). In the third phase, the data for the survey aimed at guardians was collected from 85 other municipalities in Mainland Finland as well as from the participating municipalities ( $n = 26$ ). Like in the first phase, the invitation to the survey was sent to all guardians of children belonging to the target group (children

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<sup>1</sup> The first phase of the experiment took place between 1 August 2018 and 31 July 2019. The second phase was implemented between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020. The third phase took place between 1 August 2020 and 31 July 2021.

born in 2015) in small municipalities. In Helsinki, one third of the guardians were selected to the sample and in other large cities, 40 per cent. The survey could be completed in Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian, Estonian and Arabic. During the third phase, the invitation to the survey was sent to the home address of 21,908 five-year-olds. A total of 4,012 responses were received (response rate was 18). The surveys in the first and third phase were implemented electronically, the difference between them being that, in the first phase, a paper form was also given to the guardians on request.

### **3.3 Interviews**

In the first phase of the experiment on free of charge ECEC, qualitative data was collected from the municipalities by interviewing ECEC officeholders in the participating municipalities. One or two officeholders from each municipality participated in the interviews and the interviews were carried out by phone or using a Skype for Business connection. The interviewees were asked about the background of seeking participation in the experiment and the implementation of the experiment from the point of view of pedagogy, service counselling and costs.

In the second phase of the evaluation, the group interviews of officeholders in ECEC were implemented as part of the Finnish National Agency for Education's network meetings aimed at participating municipalities. The themes of the group interviews were related to the preconditions for organising the experiment, the pedagogy and the ECEC day of a five-year-old as well as to communications and service counselling in the experiment.

### **3.4 Already existing sets of material**

Different statistical and register data was taken advantage of in the evaluations part of the experiment. In all phases of the experiment (2018–2021), Statistics Finland was requested to provide the number of children living in municipalities approximately six months before the beginning of the experiment (15 January), at the beginning of the experiment (15 September) and six months into the experiment (15 January). The data from Statistics Finland included the population data of municipalities and information on their degree of urbanisation, migration, economic dependency ratio, the proportion of foreigners in the population, the proportion of those with a higher education degree (population over 15 years of age), the number of jobs in the region, the employment rate, the proportion of the unemployed in the workforce, the operating net costs of health and social services in relation to the population, and the operating net costs of education and cultural services. In addition to these, the register data on the number of children receiving

child home care allowance obtained from Kela was used in the evaluations of the second and the third phase. The register data was requested approximately six months before the experiment phase began (15 January 2019 and 2020), at the beginning of the experiment (15 September 2019 and 2020) and six months into the experiment (15 January 2020 and 2021).

The microsimulation method of Statistics Finland (the SISU model) was used to estimate the costs of the second phase of the experiment on free of charge ECEC. The SISU model is a calculation tool modelling the personal taxation and social security systems in Finland, developed by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) and maintained by Statistics Finland (see Siippainen et al. 2020). In addition, municipal-specific panel data on the operational costs and revenue in ECEC from the period 2015–2018 was used in analysing the costs. Similarly, the data on the usage costs and revenue in the period 2015–2018 included in the financial statements of municipalities received from Statistics Finland were used in the evaluation of the second phase (see Siippainen et al. 2020).

### 3.5 Implementers of the evaluation

FINEEC has been responsible for evaluating the experiment. In the first phase of the evaluation, the project manager was Senior Evaluation Advisor **Anna Siippainen**. In the second phase, Senior Evaluation Advisor **Maiju Paananen** as well as **Anna Siippainen** were responsible for the evaluation. In the third phase, the project manager was Senior Evaluation Advisor **Julia Kuusiholma-Linnamäki**. The evaluation team was chaired by Counsellor of Evaluation **Laura Repo** (until 17 January 2020) and Senior Evaluation Advisor **Anna Siippainen** (as from 27 January 2020). The other FINEEC employees working in the project included Counsellor of Evaluation **Jani Metsämuuronen** (statistical methods), Evaluation Expert **Anne Kivistö** (1 August 2018–31 July 2019) and **Sini Leikkola** (1 August 2019–31 December 2019), Senior Evaluation Advisor **Tuomas Sarkkinen** (1 January 2020–31 August 2020) and Senior Evaluation Advisor **Laura Lepola** (as from 1 August 2020). In addition, trainee **Aino Poroila** also worked in the third phase of the evaluation.

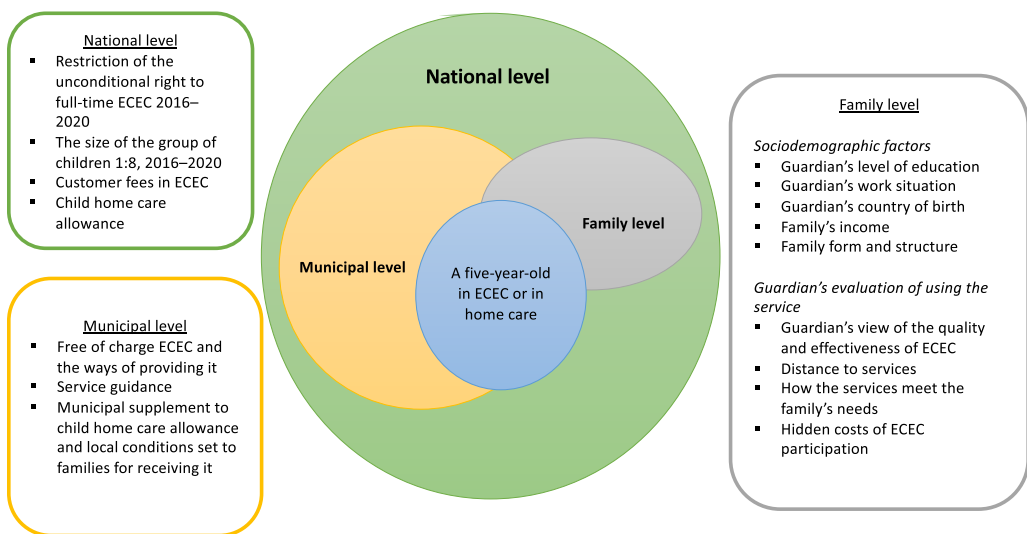
The members of the expert group of the evaluation project were Professor of Early Childhood Education **Maarit Alasuutari** (University of Jyväskylä), Service Manager for early childhood education **Päivi Koivisto** (City of Jyväskylä) and Researcher **Miia Saarikallio-Torp** (Kela Research). In the third phase of the evaluation of the experiment, Professor of Social Policy **Mikael Nygård** (Åbo Akademi University) joined the expert group. Senior Statistician **Elina Ahola** (Statistics Finland) and Postdoctoral Researcher **Tanja Kirjavainen** (University of Jyväskylä) were experts external to the expert group in the third phase of the experiment.



***Participation in  
early childhood  
education and care***



ECEC participation of five-year-olds has been examined in all phases of the experiment by monitoring the changes that have taken place in ECEC participation. In addition to this, it has been examined what factors affect the ECEC participation of five-year-olds.



**FIGURE 2. Factors linked to ECEC participation of five-year-olds on the basis of the evaluation**

A number of factors at different levels affect the decisions made by families regarding childcare and ECEC (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari 2014). In this evaluation, ECEC participation of five-year-olds was examined from the point of view of factors at the national, municipal and family level (Figure 2). The national level refers to, for example, acts and statutes regulating the provision of ECEC or the client fees. In this evaluation, interest is focused especially on defining the child’s unconditional right to full-time ECEC, the size of the group of children, the client fees in ECEC and the child home care allowance. At the local level, this evaluation has looked

at whether the municipality has participated in the experiment on free of charge ECEC, whether municipal supplements to child home care allowance are paid in the municipalities and what kind of conditions have been set for receiving the allowance. At the level of families, the aspects examined include the guardian's level of education, employment situation, country of birth, income and family form, and whether there is a sibling under the age of three in the family. In addition, guardians have assessed the use of the services, such as the quality and the hidden costs of ECEC and factors related to its availability.

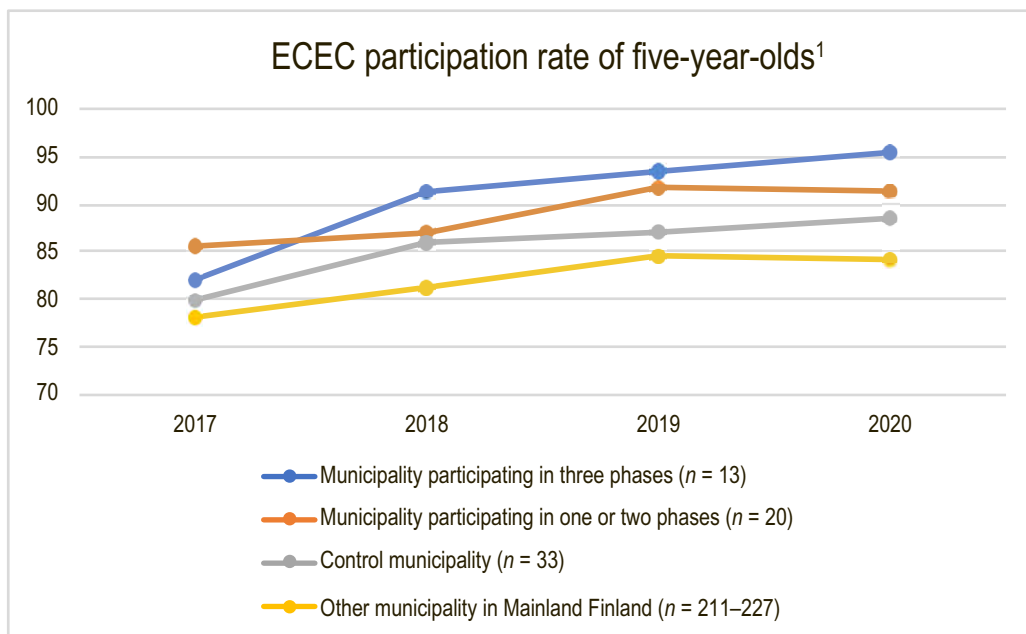
#### **4.1 Changes that have taken place in participation in ECEC**

One of the objectives of the experiment was to increase the participation of five-year-olds and children younger than that in ECEC. In the experiment, the municipalities provided 20 weekly hours of ECEC free of charge to five-year-olds. ECEC participation of five-year-olds was monitored in all phases of the experiment and changes in the participation of children younger than that in the last two phases of the experiment. The changes that have taken place in participation have been examined in the data of the municipal surveys implemented during each phase of the experiment.

Based on the experiment, providing 20 weekly hours of free of charge ECEC increased ECEC participation of five-year-olds in all of its phases. In the second phase of the experiment, the experiment had also slightly increased ECEC participation of four-year-olds. However, the participation of children under the age of four did not increase. In the third phase of the experiment, free of charge ECEC had not increased the participation of children aged 3–4. Moreover, it is worth noting that the rate of ECEC participation of children aged 3–4 was already higher in the municipalities participating in the experiment to start with than in other municipalities. The participation of children under the age of two had not increased as a result of the experiment at any stage of the experiment.

The longitudinal setup in the examination of the rate of ECEC participation highlights more accurately the changes that have taken in it and the differences between the participating municipalities and other municipalities (Figure 3). On 31 December 2020, the ECEC participation rate of five-year-olds was almost 96 per cent in municipalities that had participated in the experiment in all of its three phases. In these municipalities, there was an increase of approximately 14 per cent in the participation of five-year-olds between 2017 and 2020. In those municipalities that had participated in one or two phases of the experiment, 91 per cent of five-year-olds participated in ECEC at the end of 2020. The participation of five-year-olds had increased by almost six per cent. In the control municipalities, ECEC participation had increased by nine per cent and the participation rate was 88 per cent at the

end of 2020. In other municipalities in Mainland Finland, the participation rate of five-year-olds was 78 per cent in 2017 and 84 per cent in 2020, an increase of approximately six per cent in ECEC participation.



**FIGURE 3. ECEC participation rate of five-year-olds 2017–2020**

<sup>1</sup>The age cohort of five-year-olds changed each year. In 2017, children born in 2012 were aged five and in 2020, those born in 2015 were aged five.

In 2019, the monitoring of children’s participation rates was extended to also apply to children under the age of five. This was done to see whether the experiment of free of charge ECEC also affected ECEC participation of younger children. In the municipalities that had participated in all of the three phases of the experiment, the ECEC participation rate of children aged 3–4 had increased most in over 15 per cent of them (Table 2). At the end of 2020, the participation rate of children aged 3–4 in these municipalities was almost 87 per cent. The second highest increase in the ECEC participation rate of children aged 3–4 was seen in more than 10 per cent of the control municipalities and was 81 per cent at the end of 2020. More than 81 per cent of children aged 3–4 participated in ECEC also in those participating municipalities that had participated in one or two of phases of the experiment. In other municipalities in Mainland Finland, the ECEC participation rate of children aged 3–4 was 66 per cent in 2017, and almost 75 per cent at the end of 2020. The experiment also affected the ECEC participation rate of children aged 3–4 in the long term.

**TABLE 2. ECEC participation rate of 3–4-year-olds 2017–2020**

	2017 % (sd)	2018 % (sd)	2019 % (sd)	2020 % (sd)	Change in the participation rate during 2017–2020 percentage unit (sd)
Municipality participating in three phases (n = 13)	71.3 (21.4)	77.7 (13.5)	85.4 (9.2)	86.7 (7.6)	15.4 (20.8)
Municipality participating in one or two phases (n = 20)	72.6 (10.1)	77.4 (10.9)	84.2 (22.8)	81.5 (10.9)	8.6 (8.6)
Control municipality (n = 33)	70.5 (15.4)	75.7 (15.6)	77.4 (13.5)	81 (15.7)	10.5 (10.1)
Other municipality in Mainland Finland (n = 211–216)	66.1 (18.1)	69.6 (17.4)	73.5 (16)	74.8 (16.8)	8.6 (14.8)
Significance (Kruskal Wallis H test)	6.289	9.508*	12.471:	16.136***	2.981
Significance (Eta <sup>2</sup> )	.017	.033	.048	.042	.012

Statistical significance \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .010$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The experiment on free of charge ECEC did not affect ECEC participation of children aged 1–2 (Table 3). ECEC participation of children aged 1–2 had increased in the same way in all municipalities. In 2017, on average 28 per cent of children aged 1–2 participated in ECEC. At the end of 2020, the ECEC participation rate had risen to 34 per cent.

**TABLE 3. ECEC participation rate of 1–2-year-olds 2017–2020**

	2017 % (sd)	2018 % (sd)	2019 % (sd)	2020 % (sd)	Change in the participation rate between 2017 and 2020 percentage unit (sd)
Municipality participating in three phases (n = 13)	27.4 (10.1)	31.6 (10.7)	37.2 (10)	33.1 (9.8)	5.7 (12.9)
Municipality participating in one or two phases (n = 20)	30 (5.4)	35 (6.2)	36.1 (7.5)	34.5 (8.6)	4.5 (6.3)
Control municipality (n = 33)	28.7 (8.2)	33 (9.2)	33.7 (11.5)	34.6 (10.5)	5.9 (6.4)
Other municipality in Mainland Finland (n = 211–216)	27.8 (10.9)	30.3 (10.9)	32.6 (10.8)	33.3 (10.5)	5.5 (8.5)
Significance (Kruskal Wallis H test)	1.750	7.100	4.566	1.163	.630
Significance (Eta <sup>2</sup> )	.004	.018	.014	.002	.002

Statistical significance \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .010$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

When children are aged 1–2 years, parental leave ends and the guardians have to choose between home care and ECEC. At this age, the majority of children enrol in ECEC.

## 4.2 Factors preventing and promoting ECEC participation

The key factor reducing the ECEC participation of five-year-olds was younger siblings who were cared for at home. In the evaluation of the second phase, it was observed that almost all five-year-olds (98 %) who did not have younger siblings participated in ECEC both in the participating and the control municipalities. Considerably fewer five-year-olds participated in ECEC if they had younger siblings who were cared for at home. This result is linked with the child home care allowance and with the municipal supplement some municipalities offer to child home care allowance.

In the third phase of the evaluation of the experiment, it was also observed that a five-year-old was more likely to be in home care if the guardian in the family was at home with a younger sibling and the family lived in a municipality that participated in the experiment and offered a municipal supplement to child home care allowance. If the participating municipality did not offer a municipal supplement, five-year-olds with younger siblings also participated in ECEC. The municipal supplement to child home care allowance had probably encouraged guardians to care for five-year-olds at home with the younger siblings even in the municipalities participating in the experiment.

Another key differentiating factor for whether or not a 5-year-old participated in ECEC was the guardians' view on whether ECEC promoted the child's growth and learning. In the evaluation of the first phase, this factor alone explained 16 per cent of five-year-olds' ECEC participation. In families in which the respondent fully agreed that ECEC promoted children's development and learning, almost all five-year-olds (98 %) participated in ECEC. If the respondents were strongly "critical about ECEC", only more than one half (58 %) of the five-year-olds participated in ECEC. A high quality of ECEC is also likely to increase the participation rate.

In the second phase of the experiment, free of charge ECEC had increased ECEC participation of five-year-olds especially in lower middle-income families. In lower middle-income families, the monthly net income was EUR 2.500–2.999. However, the experiment had not increased the proportion of children of families in the lowest or the highest income categories in ECEC. It was common for the five-year-olds in the highest and the very lowest income categories to participate in ECEC. In the third phase of the experiment, it was observed that the gross income of the family did not explain whether or not the five-year-old was in ECEC in the participating municipalities. The family's income also did not explain the ECEC participation of the five-year-old in the control municipalities selected for the participating municipalities. During the experiment on free of charge ECEC, the income limits serving as the basis for the client fees had been raised on 1 January 2018 and again in 1 August 2020. The changes in the client fees in ECEC seem to have promoted equal ECEC participation of children in families of all income categories.

It was already observed in the first phase of the experiment that the participation of five-year-olds was linked with both national and local policies on children. ECEC participation in the municipality was linked with limiting the unconditional right between 2016 and 2020. In addition to this, ECEC participation was linked with the increasing of group sizes in ECEC in the municipality as permitted by law. The participation rate was higher in those participating and control municipalities in which the changes made to legislation, i.e., restricting the unconditional right to ECEC and increasing the group size, had not been implemented.

Based on the results of the evaluation, it would seem that municipalities' positive attitude to ECEC can increase children's ECEC participation. Municipalities' participation in the experiment on free of charge ECEC had in itself been a message to families that all children – regardless of the family's employment or financial situation – were welcome to ECEC. Some guardians described how the experiment on free of charge ECEC had changed both their own attitudes and the general atmosphere in the municipality. The experiment of free of charge had encouraged some guardians to choose ECEC as the childcare solution for a five-year-old, for example, in a situation in which one guardian was at home with a younger sibling. The municipality's participation in the experiment has thus changed the view of some guardians on what is a socially acceptable ECEC and childcare arrangement.

There were also regional differences in ECEC participation. Of the areas of the Regional State Administrative Agencies, participation in ECEC was the lowest in the Northern Finland. At the level of the regions, participation in ECEC was the lowest in Northern Ostrobothnia and the highest in Kymenlaakso. The fees in ECEC probably do not explain regional differences. In addition to policies on families with children, low participation rates in certain areas may be linked to long distances or, for example, the above-mentioned atmosphere and attitudes in the municipalities. The nearest ECEC centre or family day care unit may be so far from the family's home that taking the five-year-old to ECEC every day may complicate the family's daily life.



***Costs of the  
experiment and the  
client fees of ECEC***



## **5.1 Costs arising from the experiment and assessment of the cost effects**

One of the objectives of the experiment was to examine the cost effects of free of charge ECEC. The first phase of the experiment looked at how municipalities compensated for the accumulation of client fees and how they organised their share of the financing. In addition, it was also examined what other costs the experiment caused to the municipalities.

In the evaluation of the first phase of the experiment, it was observed that municipalities incurred costs from the experiment as a result of both the increased number of children and the reduction in the revenue from fees. The compensation paid to private actors also increased the costs of the experiment in some municipalities. The costs of the experiment had been covered by the savings resulting from shrinking age groups and reduced child home care or open early childhood education. In addition, the rate of ECEC participation of five-year-olds required investments in facilities and an increase in personnel costs. On the basis of the interviews conducted with officeholders in ECEC and the survey to municipalities, it was observed that estimating, allocating and monitoring the costs of the experiment and the loss of client fees had been challenging for the municipalities as it had been difficult to pin the costs down specifically to the experiment on free of charge ECEC. Because of the costs resulting from the experiment, municipalities may have had to reduce other costs related to the provision of ECEC. If the aim is to increase the ECEC participation rate, sufficient funding for it should be allocated to municipalities. It is of primary importance that waiving the fees in ECEC services does not result in a falling quality of the services.

In the interviews conducted in the first phase of the experiment on free of charge ECEC, municipal officeholders brought up the fact that, in spite of the costs incurred from the experiment, the ideology of free of charge ECEC and providing it was considered worth supporting. According to the interviewees, the experiment on free of charge ECEC had increased the positive discussion on ECEC both publicly and among the municipal operators. The importance of ECEC as the first stage of lifelong learning had been identified in the discussions.

The costs effects of the experiment on free of charge ECEC to the participating municipalities were examined in the second phase of the evaluation of the experiment. It was possible to measure the cost effects only in the first year of the experiment, in 2018, as the municipality-specific financial information for 2019 was not available when the cost analyses of the second phase were conducted. From the point of view of assessing the cost effects, the experiment had not been under way for more than six months. Determining the costs of free of charge ECEC requires a more long-term examination.

According to the evaluation of the second phase, the increase in the overall costs of free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds would be greatest in the areas of the Regional State Administrative Agencies for Western Finland and Southern Finland. These areas would see the greatest increase in the number of children. If all municipalities changed over to free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds and if nine square metres of additional space would have to be built for all new children enrolled in ECEC, approximately EUR 100 million should be reserved for the additional costs resulting from 1,512 children according to the evaluation. If facilities need to be built only for 80 per cent of the new children, the projected additional costs would amount to approximately EUR 80 million.

## **5.2 Client fees and costs incurred by families**

As a result of the experiment, the client fees of ECEC for five-year-olds had fallen, which was experienced by the families in different ways. In some of the families, free of charge ECEC had not affected the daily life of the family and the five-year-old had participated in ECEC in spite of the experiment. In other families, the reductions in the client fees for ECEC had facilitated the financial situation of the families in many ways. The five-year-old had started in ECEC or the money saved as a result of lower fees had been used for the children's hobbies or healthy food, for example. Some of the families were of the opinion that the ECEC fees in Finland were relatively low even to start with and were prepared to pay even more than currently for high-quality ECEC services. In addition to these, some respondents brought up conflicts between the local service systems of ECEC and childcare allowances, which caused hidden costs in the participation in free of charge ECEC to families of five-year-olds.

In the surveys to guardians conducted during the first and the third phase, it was observed that some of the families in the participating municipalities incurred costs even if the child participated in ECEC only for the 20 weekly hours that were free of charge. Participation in the experiment could mean that the families lost some other childcare allowances. Municipalities' varying practices in granting the municipal supplement to child home care allowance drew criticism from the guardians who

responded to the survey in the third phase. The five-year-old's participation in the free of charge ECEC could mean that the family lost the municipal supplement to the child home care allowance for the younger child, thus weakening the family's financial situation.

The third phase of the experiment also revealed that municipalities had varying practices regarding how they invoiced families if the child was in ECEC for more than the 20 weekly hours. Apparently, some of the municipalities had interpreted the invoicing for free of charge ECEC to mean that 80 per cent of the normal client fee was charged for the part exceeding the 20 weekly hours of ECEC. In that case, the monthly fee became fairly high. Guardians also criticised municipalities' ways of invoicing for free of charge ECEC. In these municipalities, those who benefited from the experiment were the ones who were in ECEC for exactly 20 hours. Respondents were also surprised about some of the practices in sibling-related reductions in ECEC. In some municipalities, the reduction for the sibling of a five-year-old was discontinued, thus increasing the ECEC fees of the younger sibling.

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***Guardians' employment***

One of the objectives of the experiment was to contribute to the employment of the guardians. Guardians' employment was examined during the evaluations of the first and the third phase. In the first phase, the examinations were conducted using data from the survey to guardians, and in the third phase, the employment statistics received from Statistics Finland were used by municipality. Generally speaking, based on the survey sent to guardians in the first and the third phase, one of the key factors explaining the ECEC participation of a five-year-old was the guardian's employment or studies.

The survey to guardians conducted during the first phase of the experiment revealed that after the experiment had started on 1 August 2018, the guardians of the five-year-olds who started in ECEC had moved to the world of work more often in control municipalities than in the participating municipalities. Although this does not support the experiment's objective of promoting the employment of the guardians, the result supports the objective of children's equal participation in ECEC in the experiment on free of charge ECEC. Considering that ECEC participation of five-year-olds increased in the participating municipalities more than in the control municipalities, the result can be considered to show that children in the participating municipalities participated in ECEC more often regardless of the guardian's employment situation. However, it must be emphasised that the group of respondents examined in this chapter was very small. Therefore, it is not possible to draw generalising conclusions on the impacts of free of charge ECEC based on this group.

In this summary of the evaluation on the experiment of free of charge ECEC, the employment rates of mothers of five-year-old children in Mainland Finland by municipality were examined. It was possible to examine the employment rates of mothers only between 2017 and 2019 as the municipality-specific employment rates for 2020 were not available when the employment figures were examined. The examination of the year 2017 was included in the comparison in order to see the employment situation in the municipalities before the start of the experiment on free of charge ECEC. Because the employment situations of mothers are affected by many factors related to the municipalities, employment was examined by selecting control municipalities ( $n = 33$ ) to the participating municipalities ( $n =$

33). When selecting the control municipalities, the aim was to take into account similarity with the demographic factors of the participating municipalities (factors related to the population and the municipal finances, geographic location etc.). Although the selection of the control municipalities was aimed at similarity with the participating municipalities, the reliability of the results should be treated with caution. A large number of factors affect the employment situations of guardians in the varying municipal contexts both at the level of individuals and municipalities, so this examination can be considered to give only rough indications.

The employment rates of mothers were the highest at all points of measurement in municipalities other than the ones that had participated in the experiment in all of its three phases (Table 4). In these participating municipalities, the employment rate had remained around 87–88 per cent between 2017 and 2019. In the municipalities that had participated in one or two phases of the experiment, the employment rate of mothers had decreased to approximately 88 per cent between 2017 and 2019. At the end of 2019, the employment rate of mothers was the highest in the control municipalities (91 %) and in other municipalities in Mainland Finland (90 %).

**TABLE 4. Employment rate of mothers<sup>1</sup> by municipality between 2017 and 2019**

	2017 %, (sd)	2018 %, (sd)	2019 %, (sd)
Municipality participating in three phases (n = 13)	87.6 (4.9)	88.6 (5.6)	87.1 (5.6)
Municipality participating in one or two phases (n = 20)	91.3 (5.6)	91.2 (4.6)	88.6 (4.3)
Control municipality (n = 33)	90.5 (4.2)	91.0 (5.5)	91.1 (4.6)
Other municipality in Mainland Finland (n = 227)	90.1 (8.0)	92.0 (5.6)	90.7 (6.8)
Significance (Kruskal Wallis H test)	3.60	.80	2.15
Significance (Eta <sup>2</sup> )	.005	.002	.005

<sup>1</sup>In 2017, the mothers of five-year-olds were the mothers of children born in 2012; in 2018 five-year-olds were born in 2013; and in 2019 five-year-olds were born in 2014.

The employment rate of mothers did not increase in the municipalities participating in the experiment on free of charge ECEC. Now that the experiment and the evaluation have ended, an ex-post evaluation using register data should be conducted on the impacts of the experiment. This way, its possible impacts on employment can be examined more carefully. Because the employment registers of Statistics Finland are published with a delay of a few years, it has not been possible to conduct real-time monitoring of the impacts of the experiment on free of charge ECEC in this evaluation.

Earlier research results on the impacts of ECEC fees especially on mothers' employment are partly conflicting (Baker, Gruber & Milligan 2008; Lunding, Öckert & Mörk 2008). The impacts on employment have been found minor. In Finland, the objective of the legislative reforms aimed at reducing the client fees in ECEC (1 January 2018, 1 August 2020 and again 1 August 2021) has been to increase the number of children enrolled in ECEC and to reduce the impact of incentive traps related to working. When promoting women's employment, the client fees in ECEC should be looked at as part of the wider system of family policy. Child home care allowance and its level have been found to reduce mothers' employment, except for single mothers (e.g., Räsänen, Österbacka, Valaste & Haataja 2019).

In the third phase of the experiment, it was observed that guardians' employment was also linked with how the ECEC services met the needs of families. Some respondents who worked non-standard hours mentioned that they had not been able to benefit from free of charge ECEC services as some municipalities had limited the free of charge time to a specific time of the day. If the child of a family working non-standard hours was in ECEC outside the hours defined by the municipality, the family did not benefit from the experiment in the same way as the others. If the services are inflexible or the family needs to know their need for services in detail in advance, both the use of ECEC services and the employment of the guardians become more complicated.

In the evaluation of the second phase of the experiment, municipal officeholders mentioned guardians' employment and lowering guardians' threshold for working as advantages of the experiment in their answers. In the survey to guardians in the third phase of the experiment, it was observed that the experiment on free of charge ECEC had a variety of consequences in the guardians' employment or study situation. Some guardians had been encouraged by the experiment to place their five-year-old in ECEC and to accept a job with a quick timetable, apply for work or become a student if the employment situation was uncertain. Based on the evaluation, the experiment on free of charge ECEC has been found to support moving on to work or studies in individual cases. However, the indicative results on the employment rates of mothers between 2017 and 2019 presented above showed that the experiment did not, based on the data used in the evaluation, have any impact on employment.



***Organising the experiment  
and the pedagogy***



One of the objectives of the assessment was related to organising the experiment and determining the needs to develop the pedagogy. The evaluation examined this objective in the first phase by conducting interviews of officeholders in ECEC and, in the second phase, by conducting group interviews with them. Questions about organising the experiment, such as the forms of ECEC and the times when free of charge ECEC was offered to families were posed in the surveys sent to municipalities in all the phases.

The interviews of officeholders in ECEC in the first phase paid attention to the pedagogical practices. In the participating municipalities, there had been discussion on the principles of what the free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds comprises. Most municipalities had decided that, because free of charge ECEC is activity governed by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, the pedagogical activities aimed at five-year-olds would also be based on them. None of the municipalities had therefore made any changes, for example, in the personnel structure. Rather, the respondents emphasised that teachers with pedagogical training are needed in all age groups in ECEC.

The interviews of the second phase revealed that, regarding pedagogy, few municipalities or operating units had formulated separate guidelines or defined focus areas of pedagogy concerning only five-year-olds. If the municipality had common pedagogical guidelines or focus areas, in most cases they concerned all children of ECEC age. In the interviews of the first phase, the pedagogy of the five-year-olds was linked to the accorded age level needs. This is in line with the principles of high-quality ECEC. For five-year-olds, the respondents highlighted interaction skills, play, the joy of learning, exploration and delight. In general, it can be said that the experiment on free of charge ECEC was described as having increased discussion on the pedagogy of all age groups and on ECEC in general both within municipalities and among different parties working with children.

The questions related to the practical implementation of ECEC for five-year-olds were assessed in all phases of the experiment. The principal form of implementation of free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds was ECEC implemented at a municipal ECEC

centre. It was observed in the second phase that in some of the municipalities, the experiment was limited only to municipal ECEC and in others, also to private ECEC centres and municipal and private family day care. There was also variation by municipality and within municipalities in the groups that five-year-olds were in. A general observation made in the evaluation was that the activities of five-year-olds were provided in several types of groups, the most typical one being a group of children aged between three and six. As a rule, the representatives of the municipalities did not hope to get more specific national-level instructions for forming the groups. The representatives of the municipalities found it good to be able to organise the age structures of the groups from the point of view of local needs, for example, considering the distances and sizes of the age groups.

In line with the instructions given by the Ministry of Education and Culture, free of charge ECEC was provided in the participating municipalities throughout the year. The survey sent to municipalities in the evaluation of the second phase revealed that the participating municipalities offered free of charge ECEC mainly on working days and in the morning. Another typical alternative was to use the 20 weekly hours of free of charge ECEC for the five-year-old as two or three whole days of ECEC per week. In the second phase, two municipalities participating in the experiment offered free of charge ECEC at the times of the day chosen by the guardians themselves.

In addition to the experiment on free of charge ECEC, FINEEC has evaluated the pedagogy in ECEC, especially that of five-year-olds, and the current state of skills and art education in Finnish ECEC in a separate survey (Juutinen et al. 2021). The experiments on free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds and on extending pre-primary education to two years implemented in the Right to Learn programme had to be taken into account in the report. The data was collected in a survey aimed at ECEC personnel, using two-stage sampling. The municipalities involved in the third phase of the experiment on free of charge ECEC were selected to the sample automatically.

According to the evaluation carried out by Juutinen and colleagues (2021), five-year-olds were in ECEC in groups of various age structures, most often at an ECEC centre. According to the respondents, activities planned by the personnel and related to the different areas of learning were organised regularly to most five-year-olds regardless of the age structure of the group of children. In examinations based on child groups' age structures, those working with groups of children over the age of five were more positive about their groups' activities in their responses to some of the statements than those working with groups of children aged 1–4 and 1–6. In particular, respondents found that activities supporting children's participation were implemented better in groups of children over the age of five. According to the responses, specific activities planned by the personnel were also organised for most five-year-olds, regardless of the age structure of the child group. Whether the

municipality participated in the experiment or not was not linked to the results. The result was the same for the whole data as well as for those respondents whose groups had five-year-olds.



***Service counselling***

The development of service counselling in ECEC was one of the objectives of the experiment. The interviews of officeholders in ECEC in the first and second phase included themes about service counselling. In the third phase, service counselling was included in the evaluation as one of the focus areas and questions related to it were posed in surveys aimed at both the municipalities and the guardians.

According to the officeholders responsible for ECEC, service counselling had been developed as a result of the experiment. According to the respondents, it had been possible to enhance service counselling quicker in small municipalities participating in the experiment than in the large cities in which the number of children is higher. Especially the largest cities had to consider new client families when solving issues related to the finances, the adequacy of the facilities and other aspects of the service structures. In small municipalities, on the other hand, it must be taken into account that the impact of one or two children staying at home or enrolling in ECEC may significantly change the participation rate.

According to the results of the first and second phase of the evaluation the information about the experiment was given especially for those families who already attended ECEC services. During the second phase of the experiment, municipalities were asked whether service counselling had been developed specifically as a result of the experiment. For example, this referred to newly created forms of service counselling or service counselling needs that had emerged. Based on the answers given by officeholders in ECEC, such development of service counselling did not emerge. Service counselling had recently been developed generally in many municipalities. According to the respondents, development work had been carried out without the experiment and/or the development had been started before the launch of the experiment. Service counselling or the information about ECEC services was not targeted specifically to groups whose participation in ECEC is known to be lower than in the rest of the population on the basis of earlier studies, and ways of reaching these groups were not separately developed. The information about the experiment and about ECEC services in general had not necessarily reached the families in which the child or children were cared for at home.

In the third phase of the experiment, it was observed that the municipalities participating in the experiment implemented service counselling more actively than the other municipalities in Mainland Finland. In the participating municipalities, information on ECEC services was disseminated more often in the municipality's services for families with children (e.g., at playgrounds, family cafes or open ECEC services). The participating municipalities also shared information about ECEC services more often through the social media. The families of five-year-olds were more systematically contacted in the participating municipalities than in the control municipalities.

In general, Mainland Finland's municipalities did not have any specific principles in relation to five-year-olds and the service counselling practices were quite similar in all age groups. Some service counselling practices for five-year-olds occurred such as guidance related to transitioning to pre-primary education, and for example placing five-year-olds primarily to neighbourhood ECEC centres that also provide pre-primary education. According to the respondents, five-year-olds who were cared for at home were encouraged to enrol in ECEC, and children who were in family day care settings were primarily encouraged to ECEC centres.

In the third phase of the evaluation, guardians were asked whether they had been in contact with a party responsible for service counselling in ECEC in their municipality when considering their decisions on ECEC and childcare. When considering these decisions, families in which the guardian was working or studying had needed less service counselling than those families in which the guardian was unemployed or otherwise outside workforce. Guardians born in Finland or with a degree from higher education did not think they needed service counselling because they already knew in advance which place in ECEC they wanted for their child. These associations were similar in the participating and the control municipalities. In the participating municipalities, families in which the five-year-old had a sibling under the age of three had themselves contacted service counselling more actively than families in the control municipalities. In addition, it was observed in surveys aimed at municipalities that service counselling had contacted families in which the guardian had been born in a country other than Finland more often in the participating and control municipalities than elsewhere in Finland.

In the evaluation of the third phase, seven out of ten guardians found that the family's preferred form of care for their child had been taken into account in the service counselling discussions, the decision had proceeded in line with the child's best interest and the child had received the desired care place. Almost one half of the guardians had felt that the discussion and decision-making had been guided by the guardians' employment situation. This result is in line with the study by Kuukka and colleagues (2020), in which the service counselling discussions were found to

focus especially on determining the employment situation of the guardians. In the study, the child was hardly talked about in the service counselling discussions. (Kuukka, Siippainen & Alasuutari 2020.)

It is useful to further develop service guidance to ensure that knowledge of the ECEC services also reaches those groups that are not enrolled in ECEC services. It can therefore be considered that service counselling in ECEC plays a significant role in whether the family perceives themselves as a client of ECEC services and whose needs the given counselling meets. Advice and counselling on the services should be based on equal dissemination of information about the possible childcare solutions available to the families. The ECEC service adviser therefore needs to have knowledge of the entire service system of childcare and ECEC. In addition, information on the availability of service counselling also needs to be disseminated in languages other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. The evaluation showed that in addition to these three languages, English was the most common language of service counselling.



***Conclusions***



In Finland, the appreciation of ECEC as the first step of the education system has increased in the past few years (Government 2019). This is also visible in many of the development programmes launched by Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government to improve the quality and equality of ECEC. The experiment on free of charge ECEC can be considered one investment in ECEC. The objective set for the evaluation on the experiment on free of charge ECEC by the Government was to examine how the experiment affects five-year-olds' ECEC participation. On the basis of the evaluation, it can be said that the participation of five-year-olds increased in the participating municipalities more than in the control municipalities in all phases of the experiment (2018–2021). In this respect, the experiment on free of charge ECEC can be considered successful. However, there are still regional differences in ECEC participation, which cannot be explained by the client fees in ECEC.

The experiment was also aimed at increasing employment among the guardians of five-year-olds. Based on the evaluation, it can be stated that the experiment did not have direct impacts on employment. The employment rate of mothers had not increased in the participating municipalities. Based on the open-ended answers to the surveys aimed at guardians, it was observed that the experiment was visible in many ways in individual families' decisions on ECEC and childcare. If the aim is to promote the employment of guardians through free of charge ECEC, the reductions in client fees could be extended to children under the age of five. As a rule, a majority of five-year-olds participate in ECEC and the reason for being cared for at home is often a younger sibling. Extending the free of charge ECEC or reduction of fees to other children of ECEC age, perhaps even to the youngest ones, could produce employment effects. The fact that it was not possible to conduct the evaluation about employment effects in real time because of insufficient statistics can be considered a challenge to assessing the impact that the experiment on free ECEC has on employment. The register data on both employment and the costs of the experiment will be completed with a delay of a few years.

The evaluation was also aimed at examining the costs resulting from the experiment. Providing free of charge ECEC to five-year-olds did not reduce the municipalities' revenue from client fees in ECEC in relation to the population of the municipality. The evaluation revealed that many of the five-year-olds who started in ECEC after

the launch of the experiment use ECEC more than the 20 weekly hours. The family then pays ECEC fees to the municipality for the time exceeding the 20 hours. The objective of the experiment on free of charge ECEC was also to develop the pedagogy of five-year-olds and the service counselling aimed at families. Service counselling in ECEC has been developed and the municipalities participating in the experiment shared information on the experiment and about ECEC in general more actively than other municipalities. No separate pedagogy had been developed for five-year-olds. Instead, the municipalities had mainly developed the pedagogy of ECEC as a whole.

During the experiment on free of charge ECEC (2018–2021), many important changes based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care have taken place in ECEC. The child's unconditional right to full-time ECEC was returned as from 1 August 2020, after which all children regardless of the family's background or municipality of residence have been able to participate in full-time ECEC. Between 2016 and 2020, the size of the groups of children was also enlarged and the group size for children over three years of age increased from 21 to 24 children. The child-adult ratio was returned on 1 August 2020, after which the size of the group has been seven children to one educator for children over the age of three. In addition to these, the limits of the family's gross income, on which the client fees in ECEC are based, was raised on 1 January 2018, 1 August 2020 and again on 1 August 2021. These changes to the client fees have made ECEC participation affordable for families with small and medium income. The possible changes in the attitudes to ECEC or the general increase in employment may also have contributed to the increase in the ECEC participation rate in all age groups (also, see Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020).

One of the challenges in the evaluation setup in the experiment on free of charge ECEC was that municipalities sought participation in the experiment voluntarily (Siippainen et al. 2019; Siippainen et al. 2020; Kuusiholma-Linnamäki et al. 2021) This being the case, it can be assumed that the municipalities were already a select group to start with. From the point of view of the evaluation setup, the ideal situation would have been to randomise the municipalities. Although the evaluation setup in this experiment was tied to the preconditions set up in advance, the experiment still seems to have increased ECEC participation of five-year-olds. Free of charge ECEC or reducing the client fees in ECEC can be considered one good method if the aim is to increase participation in ECEC also in the future.

# 10

*Recommendations*

Based on the evaluations of all the three phases of the experiment on free of charge ECEC for five-year-olds and this summary, FINEEC proposes the following measures for promoting ECEC participation and developing ECEC and the benefit systems of childcare allowances.

- 1. Free of charge ECEC is a good way of promoting ECEC participation.** According to the evaluation, the experiment increased the participation of five-year-olds in all phases of the experiment. If the aim is to make ECEC partly free of charge, the grounds for determining the client fees for families must be harmonised as there are currently municipality-specific differences.
- 2. Local practices in granting the municipal supplement to child home care allowance must be placed under monitoring.** The evaluation showed that ECEC participation of five-year-olds was lower when the municipality paid a municipal supplement to child home care allowance. Those five-year-olds whose younger sibling was cared for at home were also more often cared for at home themselves. The most typical condition for the municipal supplement in municipalities offering it was that all children of ECEC age in the family must be cared for at home. This condition conflicts with the child's unconditional right to full-time ECEC.
- 3. ECEC participation is promoted by ECEC services that flexibly meet families' needs related to childcare.** The evaluation revealed the varying practices of municipalities regarding the form of operation (family day care, public or private ECEC centre) or the times (e.g., only between 9.00 and 13.00 on working days) of ECEC provided to families. The ECEC system should enable all families wanting their children to participate in ECEC to have that opportunity.
- 4. Taking care of the quality of ECEC promotes participation in ECEC.** The evaluation revealed that guardians' view of the quality of ECEC and its importance for children's growth and learning was linked to whether the five-year-old participated in ECEC or not. If the aim is to make ECEC free of charge, it is important to support municipalities financially in the provision of ECEC services.

- 5. Service counselling in ECEC helps to reach new families and contributes to families feeling welcome to use ECEC services.** It is useful to develop service guidance further to ensure that the information about it also reaches those groups who do not participate in ECEC services. Service counselling in ECEC plays a significant role in whether the family perceives themselves as a client of ECEC services. Service counselling and guidance should be based on equal dissemination of information about the possible childcare solutions available to the families.

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The government launched an experiment on organising free of charge early childhood education and care (ECEC) for five-year-old children for the period 2018–2020. Prime Minister Sanna Marin’s government continued the experiment until 31 July 2021. The purpose of the experiment was to increase the participation rate of ECEC. The experiment also aimed to develop the pedagogy and service counselling of ECEC. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) evaluated the implementation of the experiment. This report summarizes the evaluation of the experiment in 2018–2021.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent agency responsible for the evaluation of education. It operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. It implements system and thematic evaluations, learning outcome evaluations and field-specific evaluations. Moreover, FINEEC supports providers of education and training and higher education institutions in matters related to evaluation and quality assurance, as well as advances the evaluation of education.

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