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An experiment on free of charge early childhood education and care for five-year-olds: The third phase of evaluation. Participation in early childhood education and care and the varying service systems in municipalities

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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 purpose of the experiment was to increase the participation of children aged five and younger in early childhood education and care and to promote their guardians' employment. 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 between 2018 and 2021. This report covers the third phase of the experiment on free of charge early childhood education and care. In the third phase, 26 municipalities participated in the experiment. The participating municipalities offered 20 hours of free early childhood education and care to the families of five-year-old children. Central government compensation was granted to the participating municipalities to cover 79,23 per cent of the estimated reduction in the accrual of fee revenue. The aspects examined in the third phase of the experiment were the participation of children aged five and younger in ECEC, the use of child home care allowance, the impact of the municipal supplement to the allowance on the ECEC and childcare solutions of families, and service counselling in ECEC.

In the evaluation, the data collected during the third phase of the experiment on free of charge ECEC and data from the registers of Statistics Finland and the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) were used. Based on the evaluation, participation in ECEC among five-year-old children increased more in the municipalities participating in the experiment than in the reference municipalities. However, it should be noted that some of the municipalities ($n = 13$) had participated in the experiment in all of its previous phases.

In the evaluation, it was found that free of charge ECEC evened the differences arising from factors related to the family background (guardian's educational level and employment situation, family's monthly taxable income, guardian's country of birth, family structure and under three-year-old child in the family) in terms of whether the five-year-old was in ECEC or not. In the municipalities participating in the experiment, only the guardian's employment was linked with participation in ECEC and being cared for at home was explained by whether the family had a child under the age of three. In addition, in other municipalities participation in ECEC was linked to guardian's educational level, country of birth and family's monthly income and being cared for at home was explained by family structure. The waiver of the fee did not increase participation in ECEC among children under the age of five. However, even at the first point of measurement, the participation rate of children under the age of five was already higher than in other municipalities.

In addition, the evaluation examined whether the experiment had decreased the use of child home care allowance in municipalities. Free of charge ECEC did not decrease the proportion of children aged five and younger who were cared for at home with the help of the allowance. In addition to the use of child home care allowance, the evaluation examined the impact of the municipal supplement to the allowance on the link between the family's background factors and the participation of the five-year-old in ECEC. In the municipalities participating in the third phase of the experiment, the municipal supplement affected the link between the family's background factors and the form of care of the five-year-old. In those participating municipalities that did not offer a municipal supplement to child home care allowance, none of the family's background factors were linked to whether the child was in ECEC or cared for at home.

Thirdly, the service counselling concerning ECEC in the participating municipalities and reference municipalities was evaluated. The participating municipalities were more active in contacting families than the reference municipalities. In the participating municipalities, service counselling had contacted the families in which the guardian had not been born in Finland more often than other families. In the participating municipalities, more information on ECEC services was disseminated in the municipality's services for families with children and through the social media than in the reference municipalities. In the participating municipalities, families with a sibling under the age of three had themselves contacted service counselling more actively. 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 service adviser therefore needs to have knowledge of the entire service system of childcare and ECEC.

Keywords: early childhood education and care (ECEC), childcare, free of charge, home care, child home care allowance, five-year-old children, service counselling