

**Advance press release on research
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A research on statutory municipal children and young people's well-being plan and state of well-being and services in Finland in 2010.

Background for the research

The revised Child Welfare Act (417/2007, Section 12) enforced in 2008 requires that each municipality, or two or more municipalities together, draw up a plan to promote the wellbeing of children and young people and to arrange and develop child welfare services. This plan, which is subject to approval by the council of each of the municipalities, is used to steer the work carried out by municipalities to improve the wellbeing of children and young people, and to manage cooperation between actors, allocation of resources, and development of operations. The plan must be taken account of in the annual municipal financial and action plan. It must be reviewed at least once every four years, in practice at the start of a new municipal electoral term.

In Finnish legislation and child policy, child welfare is a broad concept which covers societal activity ranging from a safe growing environment, services accessible to everyone and support to parenthood to provision of last-resort child welfare support measures. A new provision on preventive child welfare was added to the Child Welfare Act, dividing responsibilities for this work widely to different service sectors and targeting preventive child welfare at all children and young people. Preventive child welfare also aims at reducing the need for actual child- and family-specific support.

Research material

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (AFLRA) carried out an extensive survey to explore the current work in Finnish municipalities to promote the wellbeing of children and young people. The survey was conducted in cooperation between the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; the National Institute for Health and Welfare; the Government Policy Programme on Children, Youth and Families (2008-2011); the ARTTU research programme conducted by AFLRA and several Finnish universities examining the development of local government and services restructuring; and regional projects on children within the national development plan for social and health care services (Kaste). The aim was to provide an overview on the welfare policy on children, young people and families and child welfare in municipalities. Material of this kind has not been previously gathered to this extent in Finland.

In the autumn of 2010, a link to four extensive online questionnaires was sent to every municipality in mainland Finland (326) to examine the following: Preparation of children and young people's statutory well-being plan by municipalities; the importance of the plan for the municipality's operational and financial management; estimates on the circumstances in which children and young people are being brought up, and the state of their wellbeing; and the extent of preventive measures; accessibility of services; and effectiveness of cooperation. Further, the survey explored the state of child welfare, for example resources and service provision and accessibility. This information will provide a foundation for the national framework for high-quality child welfare services being drafted and for proposals for its improvement.

The response rates to the survey questionnaires were representative of the local government sector. Nearly half of the municipalities had drawn up the plan together with other municipalities. The Finnish local government and services restructuring also requires that municipalities with a population of less than 20,000 people provide primary health care and closely associated social services in cooperation with other municipalities.

Key findings from the perspective of child welfare:

- Close to 80 per cent of the municipalities that responded to the survey estimated that the plan will contribute to the achievement of the main child welfare objectives. The process of drafting the plan provided a sound basis for widely distributed responsibility for the work to promote children's and young people's wellbeing, including child welfare work. The inclusion of children, young people and families is not well accomplished.
- The most important reasons for becoming a child welfare client are: learning difficulties, drug and substance abuse by children/young people and their mental wellbeing, youth unemployment, difficulties in securing a place in education or training, stress in family life, conflicts within family, poverty among families with children and problems in making ends meet, coping of parents, parenting skills, drug and substance abuse by parents and their mental health problems and violence in intimate relationships.
- Basic public services are well accessible, but preventive child welfare support services are only just recovering from the economic downturn of the 1990's. A good example is the accessibility of home help services and family counselling.
- There are regional differences within the country in child- and family-specific child welfare. Some social workers have a very large number of clients, which does not allow them to adequately attend to the client's needs.

The research report will be published in the publication series of the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities www.kunnat.net in the autumn of 2011 .

For more information, please contact:

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