

Role and Success of Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care in Supporting Child Welfare Clients: Perspectives from Parents and Professionals

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Published online: 27 October 2015

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Abstract Day care in Finland comprising care, education and teaching—called Educare or the ECEC model—can be used as an open care (community care) support measure for children whose development is at risk. The general aim of the study was to investigate whether the needs of child welfare client children and their parents are fulfilled in day care services from the perspective of parents and professionals. The questions were: (1) How are the individual needs of child protection client children met in day care? (2) In what way does day care support the parenting of child welfare client parents? (3) What kind of enabling and hindering factors, processes and mechanisms are there for good outcomes from day care for children and parents? The study uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The methods used were a questionnaire for parents (N = 42), group-level documentary materials from day care and social services officers about the problems faced by client children and parents, and interviews with ECEC and child welfare staff (N = 28). Parents experienced many problems, including exhaustion, poor mental health, substance abuse and parenting problems. Twenty percent of the children had individual support needs. The parents were very satisfied with the ECEC service their children were receiving and the parenting support provided. The ECEC professionals highlighted many positive changes in children in day care and they were also able to support parenting. The enabling and hindering factors for good outcomes were connected with the attitudes and problems of the clients, administrative processes within sectors, and

cooperation between ECEC and child welfare staff. ECEC services can considerably increase the safety and well-being of child welfare client children and support their parents in their upbringing. The role and cooperation of ECEC and child welfare staff need clarification.

Keywords Socially endangered children · Children at risk · Early childhood education and care · Child welfare · Counseling parents

Introduction

Universal services for families with children have been considered key to the Nordic welfare model (Sipilä 1997). A significant characteristic of Nordic ECEC policy—although there are differences between Nordic countries—is the idea of children’s education and care being shared between families and public institutions (Karila 2012). One of the main principles of child welfare and family policy in Finland is that families should be supported in their children’s upbringing (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013), although the primary role of parents as caregivers for their children is stated in laws and guidelines. We ask whether the ECEC system succeeds in responding to the needs of children coming from vulnerable families without labelling them.

Analyses of the Nordic Early Childhood Education and Care services (hereafter ECEC services or the Educare model) have revealed contradictory tendencies in Finnish child care policy regarding children’s participation in public ECEC services. Finland has introduced the strongest rights for public child care within the Nordic welfare regime. Children aged 0–6 years have a right to participate in ECEC services, regardless of parental employment

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status. Free part-time preschool is available for all six-year-olds. At the same time, a large proportion of children are cared for at home. Home care allowance can be paid to families with a child under three who is not cared for in municipal day care. In 2012 about 50 % of young children, especially those under the age of three, were cared for at home (Lindeboom and Buiskool 2013). Child care allowance is most popular among mothers (90 % of recipients) with lower levels of education and with several children. Repo (2010) concluded that a growing number of Finnish mothers are at risk of becoming marginalised from the labour market. This may also result in children's marginalisation from public early childhood education which, if it is of high quality, has been shown to promote positive child development for all children (e.g. Belsky et al. 2007) and especially for children from low income families (Reynolds et al. 2001) and those in receipt of child welfare services (e.g. Ellenbogen et al. 2014).

The Finnish ECEC model, which combines day care, early education and learning, aims to progress well-being, development and learning for the benefit of children under 6 years of age (Laki lasten päivähoidosta 1973 and the legal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s). Both the Educare model and the Child Welfare Act (417/2007) emphasise the well-being of children as their central aims. The Child Welfare Act sets out the obligations for different service sectors to promote children's well-being and safe conditions in which to grow up. The aim is to help children and their parents mainly by providing non-institutional, community-based support measures and to avoid the placement of the child outside the home. In the Finnish system, many of the child- and family-specific support measures are conveyed via child welfare services. Universal services like well baby clinics and day care centres have a role to play in recognising early signs of concerns and preventing, mitigating and even rehabilitating child welfare and protection problems. This task illustrates the comprehensive concept of child welfare in Finland. It also emphasises the potentially significant role of ECEC in child welfare and child protection services. There are, however, tensions and issues in addressing support for children, parents and families and in cooperation between the different professions involved, including early educators and social pedagogy workers (Onnismäa 1999; Onnismäa and Kalliala 2010).

Despite the long history and strong position, research into the role and success of day care in helping *socially endangered children* or child protection clients from the perspective of parents and professionals is almost non-existent in the Nordic countries. It is rather surprising that in our Nordic welfare system, the link between ECEC and child welfare has been given such scant consideration. Socially endangered children are defined by Jensen (2009) as children who are at risk of being in or being placed in a

vulnerable position, personally, socially and societally, as a consequence of being brought up in families marked by poverty and other vulnerable living conditions, and as a consequence of how they engage from a very early age with the children's institutions in society.

Considering Finnish circumstances, one of the reasons may be that day care is a basic and universal service for all children and families, while child welfare/child protection is a means-tested special service for children in need or children at risk. However, some children and families are clients of both systems. Day care also plays an important role in referring children to social workers, as they work in close daily contact with children and their parents. Our previous study on helping children with special needs (Pölkki 2001; Pölkki et al. 2001) suggested that day care managers saw quite a lot of obstacles to attaining good outcomes for children at risk of child protection problems. The majority of the hindrances were connected with lack of time and administrative processes in child protection services and day care—the problems of inter-agency and inter-professional collaboration were particularly emphasised.

Our present study asks how well public ECEC services are able to respond to the needs of child welfare clients from the perspective of parents and professionals. It also aims to clarify those factors, processes and mechanisms which enable or prevent success or positive outcomes for these children and their parents. This is also generally expected to decrease inequality between children. Before answering these questions, we briefly describe the development, basic principles, goals and tensions in the Finnish system of early education and care.

The Finnish ECEC as a Promotive and Preventive Service for all Children and Families

The roots of the Finnish ECEC system stem from the private kindergartens and kindergarten teacher seminars of the 1890s. The Froebel approach also has a strong tradition in Finnish kindergartens (Oberhuemer et al. 2010). Before 1973, there were all-day and half-day kindergartens or separate groups for all-day and half-day activities in the same kindergarten. All-day kindergartens for the children of single mothers or children of two working parents were considered to be a social service and carried a certain social stigma, whereas half-day institutions—mainly with children from middle-class families—were considered to be educational institutions. Kindergarten teachers were responsible for the activities in both types of institutions. In addition to these, there were day nurseries (*crèches*) staffed mainly by nursery nurses. After 1973, the kindergartens and day nurseries were joined together to form day care centres; this decision could be interpreted as the starting

point of the Educare ideology (Onnismaa and Kalliala 2010).

As early as in 1980, the Committee for the Alignment for Goals in Day Care strongly emphasised the position of parents as primary caregivers in day care and their right to know how their children are being raised in institutional day care (Välimäki and Rauhala 2000, 397). This principle is implemented in current practices of day care as a *partnership in upbringing* and drawing up an *individual educational plan* for a child with parents (Alasuutari and Karila 2010). An obligation was also introduced for day care to provide a special care or rehabilitation plan for children with special educational needs and/or from risky environments (Heinämäki 2004). The development of early childhood education and care as a social service for families has been based on the principles of *universalism*: the importance of universal family benefits, government responsibility for the economic well-being of families with children, and gender equality, which means equal opportunities for men and women to participate in working life (see, for example, Hiilamo 2004, 22–23; Kangas and Rostgaard 2007).

In day care, the major milestone was the 1973 Child Day Care Act, which saw the start of a new period (Kröger 2011, 150). This law defined day care as a universal social service for children and families (Lastentarhanopettajaliitto 2009; Kröger 2011, 150). In 1985, the Finnish government adopted a law which was unique in the world. This law granted all guardians of children under three subjective rights to send their child to day care provided by their local authority (Sipilä and Korpinen 1998, 264). In 1996, this subjective right was extended to all children of preschool age in Finland. What is notable is that this reform in Finland took place at almost the same time as cutbacks that were being implemented in many areas of social support as a result of the recession (Hiilamo 2004, 35).

In Finland, several types of ECEC institutions exist alongside each other, sometimes offered by the same institutions (Lindeboom and Buiskool 2013). Early childhood education is regulated by law, and all children under school age have a subjective right to a day care place, regardless of the social, economic or employment status of their parents (Alasuutari and Karila 2010, 100; Laki lasten päivähoidosta 36/1973—which is being reformed as the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care). Finnish families with children nowadays have equal access to high-quality early childhood education services everywhere in the country. Parents can choose between municipal day care—either in a day care centre managed by highly trained staff or in the home of a family day care provider—and private day care in the home of a childminder with usually significantly less training, subsidised through a

private day care allowance. One parent can also stay at home on child home care allowance if the child is under the age of three. Day care costs depend on the size of the family and the respective level of income (in 2013, the cost varied between 18 and 233 euros a month for one child) (Lindeboom and Buiskool 2013).

Although there are different positive options for families to choose from, public day care services are used by about 60 % of children, usually starting between the ages of 1 and 3. The year before school starts at the age of seven, part-time preschool is provided free of charge, which is attended by almost all children. Universal child care services for young children have also provided a foundation upon which many lone parents, even without a high income, can build a life that allows them to combine paid employment and family life (Kröger 2010, 397). The day care system has had a great impact on family and working life as well as on children, for whom day care has meant an important institution of everyday life. Because Finnish day care includes both education and care, the staffs are multidisciplinary. In day care centres, all staff must have at least secondary-level education, and one-third of the staff must have a post-secondary degree (bachelor of education, master of education or bachelor of social sciences) (Heinämäki 2008).

Special Support for Child Protection Client Children and Parents in Educare Services

As stated above, there are also arguments in favour of public day care which are connected to the social background of families in the Nordic countries. Hiilamo and Kangas (2009) write how, especially in Sweden, public day care combines children's interests with equality, especially between rich and poor children or between the sexes. Children from different backgrounds are given equal opportunities and compensation is targeted at children who have a scarcity of resources at home. These arguments are also seen in Finnish discussions on day care as a resource or support for financially or otherwise disadvantaged families (Salmi 2012; Koho 2012).

On the basis of the Child Welfare Act (2007/417; Heinämäki 2004) and the National Curriculum Guidelines for ECEC (Stakes 2004), ECEC should offer early and special support for children in need or at risk of serious problems. Therefore, day care can also be considered as a target-oriented measure for socially vulnerable children and their parents. In Finnish day care, children with special needs are usually included in the general system of ECEC. A child with special needs may also be placed in a special educational needs (SEN) group (5 %), or in an integrated group (10 % of children with SEN). Still, 85 % of children with SEN receive instruction in mainstream education from a

special needs preschool teacher who visits the institution regularly (Heinämäki 2008).

Although ECEC services are defined as a universal service for families, and all children have an *individual educational plan* negotiated with parents, those children with special educational needs benefit from extra resources with respect to time and education of the staff, and in these cases they may have a rehabilitation plan because of special educational needs but they do not necessarily need to be a client of the child protection system. In addition to this, the child may also have a care plan in child welfare which should be taken into consideration by professionals in day care. Besides that, the child welfare families may get other services, such as family work (see Kuronen and Lahtinen 2010).

Cooperation between parents, ECEC and child protection services is required by law (Child Welfare Act 417/2007). In addition, day care professionals are obliged to make referrals to child protection social work if they notice that a child in their care is not well cared for, or appears to be neglected or suffering from abuse. The manner in which early concerns are dealt with in day care with parents, and how these are conveyed to social workers is crucial. When a child becomes a client of the child protection services and ECEC is considered as a special support measure, the use of ECEC should be documented by the child welfare office and parents are advised to inform day care professionals that they are child welfare clients. Social workers have the right, however, to receive information about the child and the family, even if the parents have not accepted the collaboration between the different agencies involved in helping the child and her/his parents. There may be different, even conflicting opinions about the role and tasks of child welfare and ECEC professionals in terms of supporting parents (Onnismaa 1999).

In this article we focus on how successful early childhood education in day care centres is in helping children and their families who already are registered as child welfare clients, and how the prerequisites for and hindrances to success are interpreted by mothers, social workers and multi-professional teams in ECEC.

Aims of the Study and Research Design

In this study, we analyse the role and success of early education and care in the lives of children and parents who are clients in child- and family-specific child protection services. The general aim of the study is to investigate whether the needs of child welfare client children and their parents are met in day care services from the perspective of parents and professionals (day care staff and social workers). The study aims to answer the following questions:

- How are the individual needs of child protection client children met in day care?
- In what way does day care support child protection client parents?
- What kind of enabling and hindering factors, processes and mechanisms are there for good outcomes for child protection client children and parents in day care?

The research design is planned so that the views of multiple stakeholders can be taken into account in evaluating the roles and success factors for children's well-being and supporting families in day care. Our study is related to evaluation studies in the sense that we concentrate on the quality of the processes and as well as the outcomes (Weiss 1998) of ECEC with respect to children's well-being and support for parenting, as described by parents and different professionals. Thus the triangulation of data helps to capture the holistic picture and identify the critical points in helping vulnerable families with children.

Data and Methods

Subjects and Participants

The subjects were 103 child welfare client children who had been in day care centres during 2013, along with their parents, from four municipalities in Eastern Finland. The respondents were from 60 individual families. The biggest municipality has about 100,000 inhabitants and the three smaller ones about 30,000 altogether. There were 51 children aged between one and three, and 52 children between four and six. The number of boys was 53 and girls 50. Some 63 % of the families (N = 42 parents) consented to answering the parental questionnaire.

The professionals, 24 females and two males, were volunteers working in ECEC child welfare services of the two biggest municipalities. The day care staff groups consisted of day care managers (four), teachers (eight), special education teachers (three) and nursery nurses (three) working in public day care centres. In addition, a group of child welfare social workers with university master's level training (six) and family workers (two) trained as social pedagogy workers at a university of applied sciences were interviewed in two groups.

Methods and Materials

The *questionnaire for parents* included both structured and open-ended questions. The main themes of the questionnaire were: general satisfaction with day care, changes in development and well-being of the child while at day care, attitudes and communication between parents and day care

staff, and forms of support to parenting in day care centres. Some 63 % of the families (N = 42 parents) answered the questions at the day care centre after the child's early education plan meeting with parents and other participants. The parents enclosed the questionnaire in an envelope that was sent to the researchers at the university.

Focus group theme interviews with child care staff were carried out with 18 professionals in five groups. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The themes of the interviews for ECEC staff were: children's and parents' needs at the beginning of day care; changes in children's well-being during day care time from the perspective of day care professionals; communication, trust and cooperation between parents and day care staff; support to parents in day care centres; stress in the work with child welfare client parents; cooperation between social workers and other professionals; and critical enabling mechanisms for positive outcomes for child welfare clients in day care.

The questions for social workers and family workers focused on the following themes: the needs of child welfare client children and adults when day care is an indicated support measure, expectations and observations of the benefits of day care for client children and adults, work processes, and cooperation with day care staff and clients. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

The information on the primary and secondary reasons for the need for day care was based on the children's case files given at group level from the social services office. Day care offices offered a description of the individual developmental needs of client children and the number of parents in the family at group level. These two case file materials, which also include sensitive information, could not be combined at the individual case level which was not seen as being necessary for the present research purposes.

Analysis of Data

The structured scales of the questionnaire for parents were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative content analysis was used for the open-ended questions and the interviews. The recorded interviews with day care staff and child welfare social workers and family workers were transcribed. The interviews were analysed by the first author using inductive qualitative content analysis. The data was prepared for the analysis by selecting themes as the unit of analysis. Units were mainly separate sentences and reflected the manifest content of the data. The written material was organised by using open coding, creating categories and abstractions. After that, the categories were grouped under higher order headings (Graneheim and Lundman 2004; Elo and Kyngäs 2007).

Procedure

The study is part of the *Needs, processes and outcomes in child welfare* project (Vornanen et al. 2011; Jaakola et al. 2014; Pölkki et al. 2012, 2013) funded by the Academy of Finland. In the sub-study concerning ECEC and child welfare services, the permission to present a questionnaire to child welfare client parents and to interview day care ECEC staff and child welfare social workers was received from four municipalities. Day care staff informed the parents of the questionnaire concerning their experiences in day care and gave them an information sheet written by researchers. The parents filled in the questionnaire, which was then enclosed in an envelope and sent to the researcher at the university. The ethical considerations according to the Personal Data Act (523/1999) and ethical guidelines concerning the privacy of individuals and other relevant ethical aspects in social research, e.g. guaranteeing the privacy of respondents (Kuula 2006, 76–77), were carefully taken into account throughout the whole research process.

Results

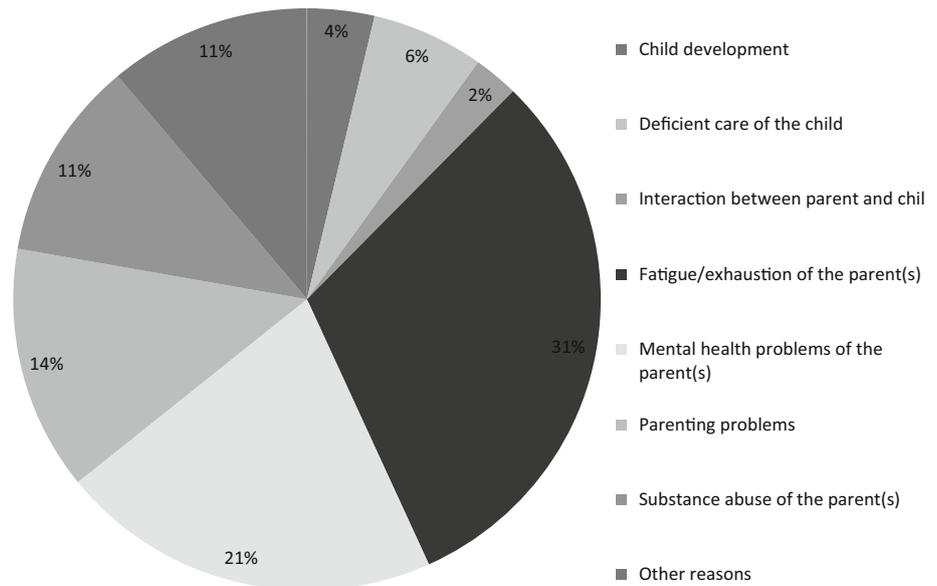
Meeting the Needs of Children in ECEC Services from the Perspective of Parents and Day Care Staff

Using the social services office files, the reasons for suggesting day care as a child welfare support measure were analysed (see Fig. 1). The primary reasons for starting or using ECEC for the child(ren) were fatigue/exhaustion (31 %), mental health problems (21 %), parenting problems (14 %), substance misuse (11 %), deficient care of the child (6 %), child development (4 %) and poor interaction between the parent and child (2 %). Other reasons (11 % in total) included family conflicts or violence, child abuse, criminality of the parent, or custody battles. Among the primary arguments, there was much more documentation on the family situation than on children's needs.

The majority of the child protection documents (59 %) included only one primary reason. The most often-cited classes of the secondary reason were child development (9 %), fatigue/exhaustion of the parent(s) (6 %), family conflicts (6 %) and substance abuse (5 %). Altogether, the documentation of the arguments as well as the interviews of day care staff suggested that in many families the parent had two serious problems, both of the parents had severe problems or, in addition to a parents' problem, there were worries about the development of the child.

In day care centres, documentation on the situation of families is scarce. For the child, the main document is *the individual educational plan* (Stakes 2004, 2005), in which

Fig. 1 Primary reason for suggesting day care for child welfare client children



children's developmental and educational needs are documented in the joint meetings with the parents. ECEC professionals had documented that 20 % of the child welfare client children had special developmental needs. About 7 % of the child welfare client children had motor development or speech delays, and 13 % had behavioural or psychosocial problems. The professionals stated in interviews that some of the children were living in very stressful family conditions, including family conflicts, substance misuse and mental health problems of the parents, and possible neglect or even child abuse.

In the interview, social workers and family workers found ECEC services to be highly valued by child welfare families. Social workers stated that in changing and fragile family situations, especially those with one parent or where both parents were struggling, day care means that there are more people caring for the child's safety and well-being. They had also observed the value of day care in the recovery of exhausted or depressed parents. Some descriptions about the increase in children's well-being and development due to early education and care were expressed by social workers and family workers working at home and in cooperation with day care services.

The child welfare *client parents* who responded to the questionnaire were generally very satisfied with the functioning of their child(ren)'s day care centre. Some 97 % of the parents responded that they themselves and their child(ren) liked the day care centre a lot or quite a lot. They described the day care centre as a safe place with nice, assertive adults and lots of friends. They also emphasised that there were good toys and spacious play areas and that the children had a lot to do.

The parents saw many of their children's positive needs being satisfied as well as developments as a result of the

child being in day care (Table 1). These were connected to good basic care, socio-emotional development, cognitive development and learning. The parents also had some expectations and criticisms. They saw that there were too few personnel and that the group was noisy and disturbing. One of the mothers felt that the personnel did not have enough competence to support her child with special needs. Some parents pointed out the inequality between children: fashionable toys and other products are needed, otherwise children are excluded from the group. This indicates that issues concerning equality may need to be discussed with parents and children.

In the interviews (Table 2), the child care staff, including managers, teachers and childminders, stated that most of the child welfare client children are ordinary children who have not (yet) been harmed. They emphasised, however, that some of these children had experienced their parents' serious fatigue and/or neglect/abuse, which was reflected in the behaviour of the child. The staff felt it was important that harmful situations should be mitigated or removed through joint efforts between parents and professionals to guarantee the healthy development of the child.

Support for Parenting in Day Care

In the questionnaire, parents were also asked about encounters with the day care staff and the parenting support that had been given at the day care centre. Overall, 92 % of the parents were satisfied or very satisfied with the help provided by day care services. They also felt that their wishes concerning their child were often or quite often taken into consideration. The parents evaluated—with three exceptions—that they had often or quite often been provided with good support in raising their child, knowledge about

Table 1 Meeting the needs of the children in day care from the perspective of child welfare client parents

Meeting children’s needs in day care	Areas of children’s needs
Child gets good meals	Physical needs
Child gets good day routines	
Imaginary play	Socio-emotional needs
Child makes new friends	
Child gets stimuli	Cognitive needs
Child concentrates better	
Child learns much, also by imitating	
Speech development	
Child has learned letters and numbers, wants to learn to read	

Table 2 Meeting the needs of child welfare client children from the perspectives of early education and care professionals

Needs of children recognised by day care staff	Meeting the needs in day care
Physical needs	Physical needs
Hunger	Child gets regular day routines
Dirty clothes, no extra clothes	Child learns toileting skills
Lack of toilet training	Child calms down, becomes more relaxed
Tired and restless	
Psycho-social needs	Psycho-social needs
Joyless mood	Child becomes more cheerful
Shy, withdrawn	Child becomes more self-confident
Seeks tenderness	Child learns to play, also with other children
Wants to be sure that the adult does not disappear	Academic skills start developing
Aggressive, problems with peers	
No boundaries	
Bites her/his tongue, tries to manage by herself/himself	

Table 3 Support for parenting from the parents’ perspective

Excerpts from interviews with parents	Forms of support
I have experienced that I am a respectable parent	Respect
They respect the mother	
Encounters and cooperation with day care mainly trustful	Trust
My child’s responsible day carer has listened to my sorrows. Thanks to her, I have managed the day well	Listening
Opportunity to talk about my own well-being	
Flexible timetables in day care	Understanding daily family situations
They understand my memory losses due to serious illness	
I now have the opportunity to have hobbies of my own	
They have supported me in assessing my child’s hyperactivity	Giving information on child’s development
They have talked about my child being a young carer and being worried about me alone at home	
They tell me essential things about my child’s day	Support for parenthood
The staff take my wishes concerning my child’s upbringing into account	
The staff support my parenthood	
The staff lack competence in the education of a child with ADHD	
I have started to attend a child guidance centre.	Guidance to other services

Table 4 Encounters with child welfare client parents from the perspective of ECEC staff

Excerpts from the interviews with ECEC staff	Aspects of encounters
Mainly good relations with parents, but takes time	Trust
Some parents ask social workers not to tell other services that they are child welfare clients and they also do not allow the child to tell, although s/he may tell about family workers or social workers. It is stressful and frustrating for the staff – and also for the child	
Some parents do not give their permission to ask social workers or other professionals to join the meetings in their child's affairs	
Concerns about safety of day care staff: in some (rare) cases with very challenging parents	
Mainly without any problems	Communication
Some parents, have many needs of their own (helplessness, depression or other mental ill health, substance abuse) and require plenty of time from the person responsible for their child's day care	
Daily encounters and feedback about the child's day	Support for parenthood
Discussions in early education plan meetings with day care staff; special teachers and other professionals may participate	
Parents' evenings, also in small groups	
"Own carer" of the child may discuss parenting roles and challenges	
Groups for mothers who are at home	
Signposting to other services	
Uncertainty about to whom and when to talk to parents about a making child welfare notification	Control

child rearing, and support to help them cope with everyday things. Many elements of partnership in upbringing (Alasuutari and Karila 2010) were mentioned by the parents in their responses to open-ended questions (Table 3).

The parents had experienced that the ECEC staff respected them. They also trusted them—there were only a few negative comments related to this issue. The parents placed high value on the fact that they were listened to and their family situations were understood. They had received support for their parenting from professionals who had also guided them to get help from other services. They also had concerns about staff meeting the specific needs of their children.

In the interview, day care professionals stated that almost all child welfare client parents had given their permission for cooperation between the day care centre and the child protection services. If not, day care centre professionals felt this situation was very harmful and unfortunate when thinking of the best interests of the child. The staff knew, however, that social workers are allowed by law to access information on the child from other services. In most cases, child protection social workers participated in early education or rehabilitation plan meetings, and sometimes day care staff attended child client plan meetings.

The child welfare client parents were sometimes found to be shy and have low self-esteem. They seemed to be afraid of their child being taken into custody if they were not considered good enough parents. This attitude interfered with communication, both with social workers and

day care centre professionals, who needed a lot of time to achieve a trusting relationship with these parents. Staffs were very worried on occasion about the aggressive behaviour of a particular child welfare client parent. Serious issues had also taken place between parents who were going through divorce. These were reflected in the communication with day care centre staff, who had to be very mindful and cautious when leaving the child with one of the parents (Table 4).

Based on their own observations of daily interactions, the ECEC professionals experienced positive changes in children and in interactions between children and parents. The ECEC staff members sometimes felt stress and uncertainty about the seriousness of signs of a child's or a parent's poor situation and did not know how to act, despite the fact that there were guidelines on early intervention. The parenting problems and the individual issues the parents faced, however, were sometimes great and the staffs were very concerned about some particular children's situations. Some of the families were experiencing serious fatigue, mental ill health and substance abuse problems. They asked: what kind of support from day care is appropriate?

Critical Enabling and Hindering Factors and Processes for Good Outcomes Recognised by ECEC Staff

Although the ECEC staff had training in early intervention and dialogical methods (Seikkula and Arnkil 2009), they

sometimes felt uncertainty and stress when talking to parents about their worries concerning their child, their parenting, and the need to make a child welfare notification to a social services office. Some of the professionals feared that the trusting relationship would be disturbed if child welfare notifications were discussed and made. There were different kinds of negotiated procedures in day care centres for dealing with concerns about the safety and well-being of children. According to managers, the aim was not to leave individual workers alone with their worries, and to offer support from the manager, special education teachers and supervisors.

Critical factors and processes for good outcomes connected with clients including their needs, attitudes and resources are presented below in Table 5.

ECEC professionals were willing to support children and their parents at risk of more serious problems. They emphasised their role as the experts in child development and education, and wanted professional support with the issues and problems they themselves were not experts in. Some of the parents did not trust the day care staff who they found to be controlling and were unwilling to accept help. It has also been stated in previous studies of families hard to reach, engage or help (e.g. Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012; Thoburn 2010) that parents (even if they are not engaged with services) really need support. Institutions such as the ECEC may be extremely important institutions for children in those families to integrate socially and learn how to participate (Stepleton et al. 2010). The availability, for parents and children, of a dependable relationship with at least one professional who can be trusted to provide reliable information about the problems and always to keep the child in mind is essential (Thoburn 2010). In child welfare cases, the ECEC has multiple tasks: to care, educate and protect the child. Central

administrative factors were connected with structures and work processes, support received, and cooperation with child welfare staff, as presented in Table 6.

The ECEC staffs were not fully satisfied with the norms and actual situations concerning the quality and amount of staff for young and older children and the optional extra resources for children with special needs. According to them, in integrated groups the number of children with special needs, such as child welfare client children, could not be more than two or three. The municipalities did not bring in new resources during short periods of illness, which led to stress among the staff.

The day care personnel emphasised the fact that they have many influential resources and measures to support children and parents with special needs. In addition to pedagogical and play activities, they found daily routines in day care with regular arrivals and departures, mealtimes and naps important for achieving a daily routine. A child with special needs may get extra resources for rehabilitative activities and support from an experienced “own carer” who may also sensitively assist the child to integrate with other children.

Special education teachers and other professionals are invited to individual educational plan meetings, and the professionals may participate in social services office care plan reviews. The resources available for parents in day care include daily encounters and discussions, planning meetings, parents’ evenings, and sometimes also small groups for parents, e.g. single parents. It is significant that day care staff tell parents about the day their children experience and that they try to make the child visible and valuable in the eyes of the parents, who themselves may have many problems and low levels of energy. The ECEC professionals also have good training in dialogical and early intervention methods. They

Table 5 Critical hindering and enabling factors and processes for good outcomes connected with clients recognised by ECEC professionals

Themes presented in the interviews	Critical factors connected with clients
Children are not harmed yet, although family situations are difficult Children trust their own day carer and also other adults in the centre Children are able to make contacts with other children and learn through social activities and contribute in joint activities Children also get rehabilitation outside day care centre if needed	Needs, attitudes and resources of the children
Parents are able to concentrate on discussions about their child and parenting and not only on their own problems Parent(s) willingness to cooperate with day care staff in the spirit of partnership in education Consent and commitment of the parent(s) to individual support measures in mental health and substance abuse services Parent(s) talk about their clienthood in child welfare and other central services, e.g. family work—so day care staff better understand the child’s and family’s situation and is able to support them more effectively	Needs, attitudes and resources of the parent(s)

Table 6 Critical administrative enabling factors and processes for good outcomes connected with administration recognised by ECEC professionals

Themes presented by ECEC staff	Critical factors and processes for positive outcomes
Amount of children with special needs in one day care centre group not too high	Structures and work processes
Goal-oriented way of working in day care and child protection	
Timing the start of work with child protection and joint initial meeting with essential partners in case matters	Support for workers
Partnership with parents in education functioning well	
Support from day care manager, colleagues and special education teachers	
Consultations from child welfare social workers and family workers	Cooperation with child welfare staff
Consultation and supervision from child and family guidance clinics, child psychiatry and neurology	
Mainly respectful relationships	
Frequent absence of social workers from joint meetings with day care, social care and health	
Cooperation between social workers, family workers and day care staff should be clarified, for example with respect to assessments and tools	

Table 7 Critical enabling factors and processes connected with clients and administration presented by social workers and family workers

Themes mentioned by professionals	Critical factors and processes enabling positive outcomes
Too many changes in social workers and changing work areas	Administration and work processes in child protection
Workload of social workers too big to be able to meet children and parents often enough	
Workload too big to be able to participate in meetings regularly enough in day care	Competences of social workers and family workers
Generally good basic education and in service-training as well as reliance on their own working skills	
Knowledge of child development could be better	Support for staff
Uncertainty and stress in the work with very needy and troubled parents	
Supervision organised properly	
Consultations with family services and psychiatry should be more easily available	Cooperation with day care staff
Mainly respectful relationships	
Sometimes the expectations of day care staff concerning the number of joint meetings are unrealistic with respect to the social workers' work load	
Cooperation with social workers, family workers and day care staff should be clarified	
Child welfare notifications from day care could be more frequent	
Lack of knowledge of day care staff on child welfare law sometimes negatively affects cooperation	

emphasised that they are experts in working with children and supporting parents in bringing up children and cooperation with them, but not in solving all kinds of family problems.

Critical Enabling and Hindering Factors and Processes for Good Outcomes Recognised by Child Welfare Staff

In the interview, the social workers clarified the possible reasons for day care for children who were cared for at home by their parents. They placed great value on the competence of day care staff to assess and support child

development and parenting from day care professionals for parents in their upbringing tasks. The social workers were conscious of the limited time they had to see the child frequently enough. In some of the cases they also hoped that the day care centre or family day care would help them to assess the children's well-being if they had vague and uncertain concerns about the family situation, such as when there was a lone, exhausted or depressed mother with children or where there was a risk of child abuse. They felt relief that children with one parent at home also had other adults in their daily surroundings.

The social workers recognised many critical factors and processes connected with clients, work processes and

administration which enable positive outcomes for client children and their parents (Table 7).

The results show that the work situation of social workers was not satisfactory. Some of the social workers were quite stressed due to their significant work load. They placed great value on the competence of day care professionals in their work with child welfare client children and their parents, and relied on the fact that they can almost guarantee the safety and well-being of the child. At the same time, they were very concerned about the situation of certain families with children and questioned whether the day care staff make child welfare notifications too rarely and rely on their own competence and strength too much.

The social workers and family workers mainly relied on their own work competencies. Some of them, however, felt that they needed more training in skills for working with children. Meeting children in neglectful and even risky family situations is emotionally demanding and stressful, and the social workers wanted to do their best. They also wanted better consultation opportunities from child and adult psychiatry services and good cooperation with them.

Sometimes, the social workers also made a decision on family work and even arranged a support family for children to visit one weekend a month. They tried to organise timetables so that the children could also be seen by family workers whose role it was to support parents. This led to the need to clarify cooperation between day care staff, social workers and family workers. Day care staff wanted to be able to contact family workers directly if they were worried about family situations. This was made possible by the consent of the responsible social worker. The family did not always commit to these measures, which made the role of ECEC and cooperation with social work even more crucial.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The Nordic ECEC models emphasise the inclusion of all children, including socially endangered ones (Jensen 2009). Despite this principle, we do not have sufficient information on the partnership between families and child welfare and ECEC professionals, or the consequences of this for children's well-being. The aim of this study was to analyse how Finnish early childhood education and care responds to the needs of child welfare client children and their parents. Based on documentation, a questionnaire and interviews, we have described the needs of child protection client children and parents. We have also analysed the factors and processes that are involved in the effective support of child welfare clients.

When a child is a child welfare client in open care, there are concerns about the endangerment of their health or

development. The aim of child welfare support measures is to prevent the child's need for prolonged support in child welfare and it leading to substitute care. Our study shows that the life situations of child welfare client children vary significantly and are often demanding. In suggesting ECEC for a child, social workers cited fatigue/exhaustion, mental health and/or substance misuse of the parent(s), lack of care of the child and parenting problems, as well as the child's developmental needs as arguments for day care, even if at least one parent was at home. There were also some serious concerns about domestic violence and child safety. ECEC staff had documented that in addition to the problems and stress possibly due to family circumstances, about 20 % of the children also had developmental/special educational needs, such as delayed language development or socio-emotional problems. Therefore, many of the children seemed to be socially endangered. It is important that socially endangered children and their parents are acknowledged on equal terms with all children and parents. This seemed to take place in day care centres. The parents were grateful for and satisfied with ECEC services, despite the fact that they also had some criticisms. By describing the benefits of ECEC for their children and themselves, they detected positive values they attached to care and different aspects of education. They emphasised the success of ECEC in responding to the physical, socio-emotional and cognitive needs of their children. These are rather similar aspects to those Rentzou (2013) has listed, on the basis of numerous studies which have adopted ratings, rankings and conjoined analysis as being central to quality early childhood education. In general, parents report safety and sanitation, caregiver warmth and quality of interaction, and physical features of the setting, the qualifications, experience and level of education and training of the caregiver, and support for learning as the most important aspects of quality early childhood education.

The social workers placed great value on ECEC and relied on staff members to take care of children's well-being and safety. On the other hand, they questioned why the professionals made so few child protection notifications. The ECEC staff confirmed that they are often successful in changing the situation of the vulnerable child and making it more positive. According to ECEC staff, day care has many possible means at its disposal to assist children in need of developmental support and those possibly at risk of child abuse and neglect. Individual educational plan discussions and daily encounters with parents are the central means for this, as is targeted support from a special education teacher. Support is given according to the principles of partnership in upbringing (Alasutari and Karila 2010), although there may be some issues concerning power relations and parental position in this cooperation (Karila 2012).

Our results show that ECEC and child welfare staff shared many similar opinions, but there were also some differences and even contradictions in their perspectives. The ECEC staff found their role with child welfare client children and parents to be too demanding and comprehensive. In certain cases, they were not able to help very needy parents, although they tried to support them to value their children and parenthood, and to find new ways to help them bring up their children. The trust and cooperation between child welfare client parents and day care staff sometimes developed slowly, if at all. The day care staff asked: what are the opportunities for and limits to supporting child welfare clients with serious problems in day care centres? Do the sometimes combined types of open care support measures really help children at risk of serious child protection problems, or do they postpone the start of more intensive measures and necessary substitute care for too long? These are serious questions and must be taken into careful consideration.

Analysis of the critical hindering and promoting factors and processes in this study offered some means to tackle the problems mentioned above. There is a need to clarify the roles and coordinated work of ECEC staff, social workers and family workers who were highly valued by all the professionals involved in this study. The sectors share common goals with respect to the well-being of children, but they should also work more purposefully together. This may necessitate in-service training on the needs of children who have experienced trauma, for example. Reviews of international literature show that quality early education can be a successful resilience intervention for maltreated children and their parents (Ellenbogen et al. 2014). For example, families involved in the Head Start and the Family Development Research Programme (Puma et al. 2012) were more talkative, positive and emotionally involved. Parents were also less likely to rely on physical punishment and were more likely to feel greater pride in their children.

In ECEC, the opportunities to help children and families at risk of serious problems is not always ideal, although the quality of Finnish and Nordic ECEC ranks highly among Western countries (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012). The authors of the above-mentioned article find that one of the main values and principles of ECEC—equality of children and families and their inclusion—is very valuable when thinking about the prevention of child welfare problems, intervening early and providing targeted help. Due to the limitations of resources in some municipalities, ECEC services may have difficulties supporting children in need and at risk in integrated groups. There are also worries about the success of achieving equality between children in day care. For example, in Denmark, where almost all children attend day care, day care institutions are criticised

for not being able to even out the influence of social background. Instead, differences between children increase during preschool years (Ringsmose et al. 2013). In our study, child welfare client parents were also conscious of the inequalities between children who were worried about their chances of providing their children with fashionable items that the majority of children had. Day care professionals have many tasks in fostering the inclusion of children from different backgrounds and in generating accepting and non-labelling attitudes in children's groups.

In our opinion, we should encourage further discussion on more profiled support for families with special needs who are not always willing to attend child guidance clinics or other special services. ECEC may be a core service for answering the educational and socio-emotional needs of children from different social backgrounds and supporting different kinds of parents in parenting tasks, and to build bridges to community and educational career of the child. Day care could also be a key building block for family support and family preservation, if social agencies and day care institutions clarify and profile their work and act together in a mutually respectful and effective way (Rodditti 1995; Stepleton et al. 2010). Not all the positive goals are automatically realised. In the spirit of critical realism (Kazi 2003), we continue to ask the main questions of our project (Vornanen et al. 2012): what helps which kind of clients in what kind of circumstances? Descriptive studies like this one help to detect critical factors, processes and mechanisms. Well-planned retrospective and prospective longitudinal studies using different data sources and good outcome measures including developmental data on children are also needed.

The above-described goals have also raised critical questions about the success of the Finnish ECEC model in combining care, education and teaching for the good of the child. For example, Onnismaa and Kalliala (2010) ask whether the attempts to enlarge the scope of ECEC unintentionally lead to an adult-centred approach with ever-enlarging social work goals and lots of unnecessary documentation. Kalliala (2012) has discussed the quality issues in day care and is worried that services for families have gradually obscured the primary task of ECEC, i.e. to promote the well-being, development and learning of the child. Keeping these questions in mind, we see, however, that the ECEC model is valuable, successful and worth developing further for the benefit of families with special needs, including child welfare client children and their parents.

Our research design, with multiple stakeholders and triangulation of data, is relevant for multiple constituency evaluation. The strength of the design is to look at the well-being and support measures for children provided by different adults, both separately and as joint efforts. One of

the limitations to our study is the rather small sample of child welfare client parents who responded to our questionnaire. We find our contribution valuable because the research area is sensitive and necessitates ethical and non-labelling attitudes from researchers and practice workers. Small-scale qualitative studies provide the inspiration for more rigorous designs. The information provided by parents and professionals—although subjective and interpreted—conveyed a rather positive picture of the inclusion of child welfare client children in day care centres. Our conclusion is that ECEC services can considerably increase the safety and well-being of child welfare client children and support their parents in their upbringing. However, the role and cooperation of ECEC and child welfare staff need clarification.

Acknowledgments This work was supported by the Academy of Finland.

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