

SWEDEN

Key contextual data

Compiled by

**Inge Schreyer, Pamela Oberhuemer,
and Maelis Karlsson Lohmander**

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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based ECEC settings are **preschool** (*förskola*, 0–5) or **ECEC centre** and **preschool class** (*förskoleklass*, 6–7)¹. Any additional forms of provision are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Sweden

1854	Opening of first crèche in Stockholm for the children of poor working mothers. Early establishments were run by foundations and churches.
1896	First Froebelian kindergartens (<i>barntädgården</i>) opened, providing part-time education for middle class families.
1904	First public kindergarten opens at the Froebel Training College in Norrköping; it is open for all children and with low or no costs for parents.
1932	Alva Myrdal proposes an integrated form of publicly funded provision with well-educated staff, to provide for children of <i>all</i> working mothers.
1944-45	First state grants are issued for provision and training; main responsibility for ECEC expansion comes under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and the National Board of Health and Welfare.
1950s	Majority of mothers at home; if kindergartens are used, mostly only for three hours in the morning or afternoon.
1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Women start returning to the labour market in the context of a fast-growing economy. Beginning of significant expansion of ECEC provision. – The first state-run training institute started in Malmö (south of Sweden) 9 May 1962.
1968 – 1972	A major report issued by the National Commission on Child Care (<i>barnstugeutredningen</i>) sets out the goals, organisation, content and practices of early childhood education for the first time, proposing the integration of day care centres and kindergartens.
1974	Introduction of paid parental leave – one of the first countries to do so.
1975	Preschool Act (<i>förskolelagen</i>) guarantees all 6 year-olds 525 hours per year of state-funded early education provision provided by the municipalities (<i>kommuner</i>).
1985	Children of parents in employment or study are guaranteed a place in public childcare from the age of 18 months.
1991	Local Government Act; decentralisation and increased responsibility for the municipalities
1995	New Childcare Act: <i>kommuner</i> are obliged to provide an ECEC place for all children from age one whose parents are working or studying, within four months of application.
1996	Responsibility for ECEC transferred from national Ministry of Social Affairs to Ministry of Education and Research.
1998	First preschool curriculum introduced (<i>Läroplan för förskolan, Lpfö98</i>); preschool classes set up in schools for 6 year-olds (voluntary attendance).

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3-reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in pre-primary settings in countries where the school starting age is 6 years. In Sweden the relevant formats are **1–5** and **6–7** years.

1999/2000	Introduction of the 'universal preschool' (<i>allmän förskola</i>) for 15 hours/week. Full-time provision is available only for children whose parents work or study.
2002	Maximum cap (<i>maxtaxa</i>) on parental fees introduced; restricted access right to public childcare for the children of the unemployed, the non-employed and those on parental leave
2003	Free universal ECEC provision for 4 and 5 year-olds (525 hours/year)
2006	First revision of the preschool curriculum (minor revisions)
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Free universal preschool provision extended to 3-year olds – Second revision of the preschool curriculum (major revisions, e.g. inclusion of subject domains and clarification of the role of teacher)
2016	Third revision of the preschool curriculum (moderate revisions) issued
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Fourth revision of the preschool curriculum comes into force. – The preschool class becomes compulsory.
2020	Children's rights (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC) were incorporated into Swedish law and as a fundamental value in the curriculum for the preschool.

Sources: Karlsson Lohmander 2004, 2018; Kaga, Moss, and Bennett 2010; Naumann et al. 2013; Willekens and Scheiwe 2020

ECEC system type and auspices²

Early childhood education and care in Sweden is part of the public education system. ECEC is organised as a unitary model with two main levels of governance: national and local (municipality). At the national level, since 1996, both centre-based and the less common home-based provision for children aged 1 to under 7 years come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Research (*Utbildningsdepartementet*). Through the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*), the main administrative body at the national level, the government is responsible for setting out policy goals and guidelines and funding frameworks relating to early childhood provision. However, the system itself is highly decentralised. At the local level, the 290 municipalities (*kommuner*) are responsible for the planning and organisation of public ECEC provision and for ensuring that the relevant steering documents are implemented. The providers of independent preschools (*fristående förskolor*), which are attended by 21% of 1 to 5 year-olds living in Sweden, are responsible for their management (Eurydice 2023; Vallberg-Roth 2015; Skolverket 2023a).

General objectives and legislative framework

National goals are drawn up by the Swedish parliament (*Riksdag*) and the Swedish government. 'Preschools' (*förskolor*) for 1 to 5 year-olds and 'preschool classes' (*förskoleklasser*) for 6 to 7 year-olds, are the two core forms of provision and are regulated by the Education Act (Skollagen, SFS 2010:800), which sets out objectives for the education system as a whole. Communication and interaction are seen as particularly important in early childhood education in order to learn new skills in a playful way and to develop a social and cultural identity (Williams et al. 2018).

Principles, goals and values for early childhood education and care are more explicitly specified in the Curriculum for the Preschool (*Läroplan för förskolan Lpfö18*), which was revised in 2018. The document states that education should convey and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. Specifically, "...preschool

² The Eurydice ECEC country report on ECEC in Sweden provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

education should reflect the values expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child” (Skolverket 2019, 5). A holistic approach to care, development and learning is another fundamental principle. The UNCRC was incorporated into Swedish law on 1 January 2020 (EASNIE 2020).

The Education Act places a duty on the self-governing municipalities to provide ECEC services and school-age educare settings (formerly: leisure-time centres) for children aged 1 to under 13 years. These settings are offered to children during the part of the day when they are not attending school and during school holidays (Education Act, SFS 2010:800).

Municipalities must ensure that parents receive a place within four months of their application.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Children have had a statutory entitlement to a place in publicly subsidised ECEC provision since 1999, beginning when they are 1 year of age. From the age of 3 up to school entry at age 6, this entitlement is free of charge for at least 525 hours per year (at least 15 hours/week) and applies not only to parents who work or study, or whose child needs special support, but also to children of unemployed and non-working parents (Garvis and Lunneblad 2018, 27; Education Act, SFS 2010:800).

There is no obligation for 1 to 5 year-olds to attend an ECEC centre. Since 2018, attending a preschool class (*förskoleklass*) has become mandatory, starting in the autumn of the year children turn 6 (Eurydice 2023).

Parents of 6 year-olds who are working or studying and whose child attends a preschool class have the right to a subsidised place in a school-age educare setting (*fritidshem*).

By making the preschool class compulsory, the school starting age was effectively lowered from 7 to 6 years in 2018.

Main types of provision

ECEC centres (*förskolor*) or ‘**preschools**’, as they are called in official translations of Swedish documents, are usually unitary, age-integrated settings and are the main form of provision for children aged 1 to under 6 years. They are generally grouped in two broad age bands: 1 to 3 year-olds and 3 to under 6 year-olds. However, there are also settings with same-age groups, mostly in ECEC settings following the philosophy of Reggio Emilia. Most centres are open from 6:00/6:30 in the morning until 18:30/19:00 in the evening, with staff working in teams (*Arbetslag*) on a rotating scheme. The full complement of staff is usually on site between 10:00 and 14:00 hours.

Although the number of children in preschools has increased steadily over the years, after peaking in 2011 the number of ECEC settings has in fact decreased since then. In 2022, there were 9,310 preschools in Sweden (Skolverket 2023a).

Preschool classes (*förskoleklasser*) were traditionally one-year transition classes located in schools for 6 to 7 year-olds. They are now, since 2018, compulsory. Municipalities have a duty to ensure that a place in a preschool class with a minimum of 525 hours of tuition during the school year is available for all children (Eurydice 2023, 4). Most children start preschool class in the August of the year they turn six and the first grade in the compulsory school in August of the year they turn seven. In 2022/23, 3,573 schools offered preschool classes (Statista 2023).

Open-door preschools (*öppna förskolor*) are community drop-in and advisory centres for parents and children who are not attending any other form of provision, and also for home-based childcare providers. They are funded by the municipalities and generally supervised by a fully qualified Preschool Teacher (*förskollärare*), although as a form of ‘pedagogical care’ (*pedagogisk omsorg*) there are no specific requirements regarding the professional qualification of staff. Across the country there were 507 open-door preschools in 2022 (Skolverket 2023b).

Home-based ECEC settings (*familjedaghem*) are a form of pedagogical care which takes place in the provider’s home (see also Skolverket 2012).

There are no specific curricular regulations and no required form of professional qualification for those working as home-based childcare providers. Although pedagogical care is not considered part of the education sector, in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, Chapter 25 §2) it is stated that pedagogical care “...should stimulate children’s development and learning”. These facilities are for children aged 1–12 years (but mostly used by families with children up to age 3) and are provided by registered home-based day carers (*dagbarnvårdare*).

School-age educare settings (*fritidshem*) offer activities, care and education for children attending school before and after school opening hours and during the school holidays. They are open for children aged 6–12 years. Children whose parents work or study or need extra support are entitled to a place. In 2022, there were 4,380 centres in the country catering for 480,000 children (Skolverket 2023c, 9).

Provider structures

The majority of ECEC settings are provided and run by the municipalities. However, since the early 1990s, independent, grant-aided provision (organised by parent or staff co-operatives, foundations, for-profit companies, and other entities) has increased steadily. Grant-aided independent schools (*fristående skolor/förskolor*) are subject to the same legal and regulatory frameworks as publicly funded ECEC provision).

In 2022, 83.6% of school-age educare settings were also municipally owned (Skolverket 2023c, 9).

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of ECEC provision according to provider type.

Table 1

Sweden: Number of ECEC settings according to provider type, 2022

Type of setting	Public/municipal	Independent, grant-aided	Total
ECEC centre/preschool (<i>förskola</i>)*	6,540	2,770	9,310
Preschool class (<i>förskoleklass</i>)**	2,964 (11 of these are state-run)	592	3,573
Open-door preschool (<i>öppen förskola</i>)***	472	35	507

Source: Skolverket *2023f, **2023g, ***2023b

Participation rates in regulated provision

In 2022, 85.8% of children aged 1 to 5 years attended a *förskola* (see Table 2) and almost 96% of 4 year-olds were participating in ECEC (Skolverket 2023d).

Table 2

Sweden: Number of children and enrolment rates in ECEC centres (preschools) according to age and provider type, 2022

Age group	Number of children	Total enrolment rates in %	Relative share in public settings in %	Relative share in private setting in %
1 year-olds	59,107	51.0	39.9	11.1
2 year-olds	105,815	91.3	71.7	19.7
3 year-olds	111,731	94.5	74.1	20.4
4 year-olds	115,309	95.6	75.5	20.5
5 year-olds	116,092	95.5	75.6	20.0
(6 year-olds)	787	0.6	0.5	0.1
1–3 years	164,922	79.0	62.0	17.1
1–5 years	508,842	85.8	67.5	18.4

Source: Skolverket 2023d

In 2022, a total of 124,327 children (representing an enrolment rate of 96.7% of all 6 year-olds) attended a preschool class (Skolverket 2023g).

The participation rates of children under age 3 in centre-based settings have increased only marginally since 2010, from 51% to 54.4% in 2022 (see Table 3). During the same period, the proportion of children aged between 3 and 6 years in ECEC provision rose from 84% of the age-group to 97.7%.

Table 3

Sweden: Participation rates according to duration of attendance in centre-based settings by age-group, 2010-2022

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	22	35
	Over 30 hours	31	52
	No enrolment in ECEC	48	13
2010	1 to 29 hours	18	29
	Over 30 hours	33	65
	No enrolment in ECEC	49	6
2015	1 to 29 hours	21.4	25.9
	Over 30 hours	42.8	70.3
	No enrolment in ECEC	36.0	3.8
2022	1 to 29 hours	16.3	27.1
	Over 30 hours	38.1	70.6
	No enrolment in ECEC	45.6	2.3

Source: Eurostat. 2023b; slight deviations from 100% due to rounding

Financing and costs for parents

According to OECD data, total public expenditure on early childhood education and care amounted to 1.56% of GDP in 2019: 1.0% for provision for under 3 year-olds and 0.6% on

provision for 3 to under 6 year-olds. This put Sweden in second place among the OECD countries after Iceland in terms of expenditure on the education sector in 2019 (OECD 2023).

The funding of ECEC provision is shared between the state and the municipalities. A block grant is transferred from the national level to the municipalities and complemented by funding through tax revenues at the local level. However, there is considerable variation in the allocation models used across the municipalities. Each municipality then allocates resources to individual settings, which also charge fees to cover part of the costs. Funding is not determined by provider type. Each ECEC setting has its own budget and in some municipalities preschool principals have to calculate how many children are to be allocated to each group to cover costs (Garvis and Lunneblad 2018). At the local level, fees are regulated according to income and the number of siblings attending. They may vary according to provider. However, a fee cap (*maxtaxa*) is set annually at the national level to ensure affordability. The maximum fee system is voluntary for municipalities but has been adopted by all and the Swedish government compensates for any loss of income (European Commission 2020, 51).

From the age of 3, at least 15 hours per week are free of charge. The time the child spends in the setting beyond these three hours is subject to a fee. No fees are paid for attending the preschool class.

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 3% of net household income on childcare costs³ (OECD. Stat 2023).

Staff to child ratios and group size

Swedish ECEC provision is internationally well-known for its favourable staff-child ratios. However, there are no national requirements, neither for preschools nor for preschool classes. Instead, the municipalities and sometimes the ECEC settings are responsible for regulating criteria for group size and the number of children per staff member. The practised ratios may vary across settings, depending on the group composition, e.g. the number of children with special educational needs, or the number of immigrant children with special language needs. The monitoring of staff-child ratios is compulsory and part of ongoing evaluation policies.

Skolverket, the Swedish National Agency for Education, has made recommendations for group size: six to 12 children for the ages 1–3 years and nine to 15 children for the ages 4–5 years (Williams et al. 2018). However, municipalities are not obliged to adhere to them, and there are no national recommendations about adult/child ratios.

Although the groups are usually organised so that 1 to 3 year-olds and 3 to 5 year-olds are in one group, there has been a recent trend towards same-age grouping. Also, sometimes two traditional groups are combined so that about 40 children are cared for in one group by eight adults. This is to increase flexibility for both children and professionals (Williams et al. 2018). Although large teams and groups with many children are less prone to staff absences, a strict structure is needed to “manage the chaos”. As a result, and contrary to the intentions of increased flexibility, the children's wishes and influences are limited. The organisation of large and complex groups involves a lot of planning, administration and bureaucracy at the expense of the time spent with the children (Karlsson Lohmander and Pramling Samuelsson 2020).

In 2022, the most common number of children in preschools was 13-15 (in a quarter of groups), but in 9% of groups there were 22 children or more. In groups with under 3 year-olds there were

³ The calculation is based on: full-time working parents (average wage); two children aged 2 and 3 years in full-time childcare; childcare benefits included.

12.6 children on average, compared to 16.2 in groups with 4 to 5 year-olds. In the ECEC centres, there were on average 5.1 children per full-time professional (Skolverket 2023a, 13f, 17).

Curricular framework

ECEC centres/preschools and preschool classes in primary schools are regulated through two different curricula.

The *Curriculum for the Preschool (Läroplan för förskolan, Lpfö 18)*, first issued in 1998, was revised in 2006, 2010, 2016 and in 2018 (Skolverket 2019). All centre-based settings for children aged 1 to 5 years in Sweden are required to work according to this document.

In the original document (1998), the goals set down were formulated at a relatively abstract level, and the areas for development and learning were not specified in detail.

The 2010 version included more specific objectives-for children's development in language and mathematics, and in natural sciences and technology. The guidelines for staff responsibilities were clarified, both at individual teacher level and at team level. New sections referred explicitly to documentation, evaluation and quality development, and also to the responsibilities of centre heads.

The 2018 version is divided into two equally long sections: one on the fundamental values and task of ECEC, the other on 'goals and guidelines' for both the children's learning and staff responsibilities. Care, development and learning are seen as mutually enhancing and inter-related. Play is regarded as the foundation of development, learning and wellbeing. Education in preschools should take its starting point both in the curriculum and in respecting children's needs, experiences and interests (Skolverket 2019). At the same time, the concept of 'teaching' has been introduced for the first time, to illustrate that preschools are part of the school system. As part of a system of policy steering by goals, regional and centre-specific educational plans complement the national curriculum. In addition, there was a greater focus on literacy, mathematics and science and technology, but also on cooperation with parents (Williams et al. 2018).

For the **preschool classes**, goals and guidelines are set down in the curriculum for compulsory schools, preschool classes and school-age educare settings (*Läroplan för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet Lgr22*). Core learning areas include: language and communication; creative and aesthetic forms of expression; mathematical reasoning and forms of expression; nature, technology and society; games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions.

The goals in both preschools and preschool classes continue to be goals to aim for and not goals to be achieved.

Digital education

The revised curriculum also emphasises the challenges posed by the information society. Children's learning should be understood in the context of these challenges (Williams et al. 2018).

In alignment with the Swedish government's national digital strategy, the most recent version of *Curriculum for the Preschool (Lpfö 18)* states that children should be given the opportunity to "...develop digital skills through an understanding of the digitalisation that they encounter in their daily lives". ECEC staff are responsible for each child being able to explore technology and use digital tools in a way that stimulates development and learning (Skolverket 2019, 15f).

However, the use of digital tablets in preschool has been debated. The Government has commissioned the National Agency for Education to review the curriculum for the preschool (Skolverket 2019) regarding the use of digital tools in the preschool. The review is to be reported in June 2024 (Regeringskansliet 2023a).

Monitoring – evaluation

According to the Education Act and the Swedish Preschool Curriculum, the quality of all preschools must be regularly and systematically documented, reviewed and evaluated, and steps for further improvement developed. Sweden has a mixed approach towards monitoring and assessment, combining national quality audits with locally appropriate quality control.

Child-related assessment

Children's achievements and educational outcomes are not evaluated formally in **preschools**. Activities and support are provided in a flexible way to account for each child's perceived needs and current situation. Dialogues with the parents on the child's well-being, development and learning of the child are held regularly, both informally and formally. The staff monitor the children's progress regularly, but there are no formal regulations on how this is to be conducted. Since 2019, when revisions to the Education Act came into effect, **preschool classes** are required to regularly inform parents/guardians about their child's development. Another requirement is that a special assessment of knowledge development relating to Swedish, Swedish as a second language and Mathematics should be made with the help of mapping support materials developed by the Swedish National Agency for Education. If this assessment shows an inability to meet the knowledge requirements, support measures are to be planned or the Preschool Principal should be notified.

Centre level assessment

Centre-level self-assessment is not regulated at the national level. ECEC settings can decide whether it should take place, although Preschool Principals are expected to encourage this. Self-evaluation instruments vary from municipality to municipality may also vary depending on the needs of the ECEC setting. According to the curriculum (Skolverket 2019, 19, 21), "all members of the work team must, based on their roles, provide education in accordance with the national goals and investigate what measures need to be taken". The Principal "has special responsibility for planning, following up, evaluating and developing the education systematically and continuously, thereby promoting increased achievement of goals".

The emphasis of evaluations at the centre level is on overall quality enhancement. Criteria may include deciding on which curricular areas and goals they should be focusing on to meet the needs and interests of the children, whether the goals they set themselves for the previous evaluation have been achieved, and how the current evaluation phase will be assessed (documentation, parent survey, discussions with the children).

The Principal's responsibilities also include developing cooperation with the preschool class, the school and school-age educare settings and providing staff with the opportunity to develop their competences in order to carry out their tasks in a professional manner.

External evaluation

The Swedish National Agency for Education has the task of ensuring that the municipalities and the private providers comply with the legislation and regulations relating to early childhood

education and care. The Swedish School Inspectorate has supervisory and external monitoring responsibility for all levels of the education system, including preschools. This includes a self-evaluation by the municipality regarding various aspects of the quality in preschools.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

According to the Education Act (SFS 2010:800), a basic principle of each level of education is access to an equivalent education for all. Children with disabilities or in need of special support are therefore not treated or defined as a group that is any different from other pupils and their rights are not stated separately. Consequently, they are integrated into mainstream early childhood provision, either in a regular group or in a special group with fewer children and access to specialist staff (e.g. psychologists, speech therapists). The municipalities are responsible for providing the necessary resources, and children with disabilities have a right to priority access to early childhood provision. They should receive education and care according to their specific needs. Children with severe and multiple disabilities are entitled to personal assistance. For each child in need of special support, a continuously evaluated action plan is drawn up by teachers, in consultation with the children, their parents and specialist support teachers.

The Education Act also specifies that municipalities should attempt to offer care to children according to their needs outside the normal opening hours of preschools and school-age educare (e.g. during the evenings, nights and at weekends). The Swedish government has introduced a state grant to encourage municipalities to increase this kind of provision (European Commission 2020, 45).

Children with a migration background – children from Roma communities

In preschool classes, the number of children with a home language other than Swedish rose from 21,067 in 2012/13 to 30,315 children in 2022/23. This accounts for 24.5% of all children. Of these, the home language of most was Arabic (23.6%) followed by Somali (6.5%) and English 86.3%) (Skolverket 2023h, Tab 3a, b).

Children from asylum seeking families have the same entitlement to a place in an ECEC institution as other children living in Sweden.

With the aim of supporting active bilingualism and the children’s bicultural identity, many municipalities have a policy of providing home language tuition for these children. Roughly one third of municipalities offer this provision for 21.5% of immigrant children in preschools.

In 2022, around 26% of children under age 7 in Sweden had a background of family migration, considerably more than the proportion in the overall population (3.9%). *Table 4* shows different groupings of children according to whether the child and/or the parents were born in Sweden or elsewhere.

Table 4

Sweden: Children 0–7 years and total population according to child’s and parents’ place of birth, 2022

	Under 7 years	Share of under 7 year-olds in %	Total population	Share of total population in %
Foreign born	34,109	4.1	2,145,674	3.0
Born in Sweden with two foreign born parents	180,999	22.0	681,448	0.9

	Under 7 years	Share of under 7 year-olds in %	Total population	Share of total population in %
Born in Sweden with one parent born in Sweden and one foreign born parent	114,206	13.9	816,209	1.1
Born in Sweden with two parents born in Sweden	494,307	60.1	68,978,225	95.0
Total	823,621		72,621,556	

Source: Statistics Sweden 2023, own calculations

86% of children with a Swedish background aged 1–5 attended preschool in 2022. The corresponding figure for Swedish-born children with two foreign-born parents is 82%, while only 73% of foreign-born children were enrolled. Foreign-born children have the lowest enrolment rate across all age groups. The difference is largest among 2 year-olds, where the difference in attendance rate is 29 percentage points between foreign-born children and children with a Swedish background (Skolverket 2023a, 10).

Looking at the child population under 5 years of age, 9.3% had a non-Swedish citizenship in 2022. More than a half of them (58.8%) came from countries outside the EU27(2020). The respective shares for the total population were 8.4% and 63.2% (Eurostat 2023c).

Sweden has a long-term Roma inclusion strategy that is effective for 20 years up to 2032. Roma are one of the five recognised national minorities with their own acknowledged language, Romani Chib (Regeringskansliet 2023b). The overall objective is to ensure that young Roma persons have the same opportunities in life as non-Roma persons. The strategy covers the areas of education, employment, health, housing, culture/language and civil society (*empowerment*). The main responsibility for the implementation lies with the local and regional authorities. In 2011, at the start of the strategy, the Council of Europe estimated that approximately 42,500 Roma live in Sweden (0.46% of the population). Most Roma children did not attend an ECEC centre (European Commission 2021).

Parental leave arrangements⁴

Maternity leave (*gravitetsspenning*) is compulsory for two weeks before or after delivery. Under certain circumstances, pregnant women can take indefinite leave at 77.6% of their previous monthly earnings. Pregnant women who have a physically demanding or risky work may be entitled to a pregnancy benefit starting 60 days before delivery (Försäkringskassan 2023, 20231115)

Temporary leave (*tillfällig föräldrapenning*) for family duties in connection with the child's birth ('baby time') is an entitlement which can be taken for 10 days, to be present at the birth or to care for other children in the family. This leave is also paid at a rate of 77.6% of previous earnings (max. SEK 393,750 €33,075.73 per year). Leave can be used at any time during the first 60 days after childbirth. To care for a sick child (from 8 months to 12 years) each parent can receive compensation for a maximum of 120 days per year (Försäkringskassan 2023)

Sweden is well known across the world for its generous parental leave.

Parental leave (*föräldrapenning*) benefit for 240 days can be granted to either parent until their child is 18 months old. 90 days cannot be transferred to the other parent (so called mother's or

⁴ The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for Sweden by Ann-Zofie Duvander and Niklas Löfgren in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

father's quota). Up to 30 days can be taken by both parents simultaneously (*dubbeldagar*) until the first birthday of the child.

195 days per parent are income-based (77.6% of earnings up to a ceiling of SEK 525,000, €44,100.97 per year), 45 days are paid at a flat-rate of SEK 180 (€15.12) per day. There is an extra pension supplement for the parent who earns the lower income during the child's first four years. Same-sex parents have the same rights as opposite-sex parents. Rights to leave and benefit are based on custody.

Since the beginning of 2014, either form of paid leave can be taken up to the child's 12th birthday. However, only 96 days may be taken after the child's 4th birthday. Paid leave days can be taken full-time, part-time, quarter-time, or one-eighth time, with the length of leave extended accordingly (e.g. one day of full-time leave becomes four days of quarter-time leave). The majority of parents take the main part of the leave before their child reaches the age of 2 years. As from the child's 1st birthday, there is an entitlement to ECEC, either in a centre-based or home-based setting, on a full-time basis for employed parents or on a part-time basis if they are not employed.

In 2022, 28% of eligible women received pregnancy benefit for an average of 63 days. 77% of all eligible persons took temporary leave, on average for 9.7 days of the ten available days. Only 1.4% were women.

Whereas in 2002, fathers took about 12% of all Parental leave days used in that year, by 2022, it had increased to 30%. On average, women took 78 days, men 39.5. 19.4% of couples shared Parental leave equally between them during the first 24 months of the child's life.

In 2020, most Parental leave days were taken by women during the first year of the child's life, while men tended to take leave when the child was between the ages of one and three.

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Sweden

Country expert assessment by Maelis Karlsson Lohmander

The first and foremost challenge in Sweden relates to **staffing shortages** (see also the ECEC Workforce Report, Karlsson Lohmander 2024). The current lack of qualified staff has led to major differences within and between municipalities and preschools across the country when it comes to staffing, positions and organisation. This has severe implications for the overall quality of early childhood education and for the possibility of offering equal education of high quality across the country. This also impacts the staff working in the preschools, who are faced with less favourable working conditions and increased pressure which may reduce job satisfaction. One consequence is an observable rise in the number of staff on sick leave.

Therefore, to ensure access to equal preschool education across the country, recruitment and retention of qualified staff, not only licensed Preschool Teachers but also Childcare Workers, are major problems which policymakers at the municipal and national level are struggling to solve. Moreover, *Barnskötare* (Childcare Worker) is not a **protected/certified title**. There is a variety of courses of different lengths from the three-year vocational programme to courses of only ten weeks' duration offered by private providers. Some municipalities employ all their unqualified staff as Childcare Workers, which may impact the quality of the education. Protecting the title and determining job-related criteria/qualifications is a demand made by the Childcare Workers' Union (Kommunal 2023).

Another challenge has to do with **enhancing the attraction of the profession**. This is particularly necessary for those teachers working in certain urban areas with a high number of families needing additional support.

The Government has increased the number of places in preschool teacher education. However, the number of applicants has decreased in recent years and many of those who are admitted do not complete their education. To improve the quality of the programmes and the status and attractiveness of the professions the Government has commissioned an inquiry on teacher education to ensure that those admitted to the programme have the prerequisites required to complete the programme and become skilled teachers and preschool teachers (Regeringen 2023:11).

In the light of **increased migration** and growing numbers of foreign-born families living in Sweden, a national challenge is how to best provide preschool education for the children of asylum seekers and migrants. Linked to this challenge is the need for increased and improved cooperation between the various actors and public services in the Swedish welfare system to facilitate migrant families' inclusion in society. Preschools are often the first place of encounter with this system. According to the inquiry on participation in preschool education and language development (SOU 2020:67), approximately 4% of all children in the age group 3–5 years did not attend preschool or pedagogical care. The inquiry proposed strategies to increase participation in preschool education among newly arrived children and children needing improved language development. Following the inquiry, the Education Act was amended. Since July 2022 municipalities of residence are obliged to contact the guardians of children who are to be offered a place in the preschool 'through outreach activities ... and who do not have a place in the preschool and inform them about the purpose of the preschool and the child's right to preschool' (SFS 2022:833, chapter 8 §12a).

To further support preschool staff, the Government has invested in continuing education to improve the knowledge of the Swedish language in preschools (Skolverket 2023e).

Although CPD provision is increasingly focusing on such challenges, Preschool Teachers and Childcare Workers also need supportive working conditions in order to maintain the special character of participatory pedagogy with a holistic perspective on care, wellbeing and learning as shared meaning-making processes.

Group size in preschool has been a recurring topic in public debates. Over the years, and as a consequence of various reforms such as children's entitlement to a place in preschool, group size has increased. In 2016, in response to the debate, the National Agency for Education proposed recommendations for group size: 6-12 children for the ages 1–3 years and 9-15 children for the ages 4–5 years (Regeringskansliet 2016). The municipalities are free to adjust group size according to local needs. Over the past year, average group size has in fact decreased by one child per group. However, preschools have long opening hours and the full complement of staff is usually on site only between 10:00 and 14:00 hours. This means that although group size on average has decreased with the lack of both regular and substitute staff in individual preschools it can be difficult for a staff member to manage 15 children.

To safeguard high, even and equal quality in preschools across the country and to counteract these structural factors the Government has initiated and invested in several reforms. One example is the new national merit/qualification system (Regeringskansliet 2023c). It is hoped that these reforms will make the profession more attractive and reduce the shortage of preschool staff.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the population in Sweden totalled 10,425,326. Since 2000 (8,816,426), there has been a slight but steady increase in the total population (2005: 9,011,392; 2010: 9,340,682; 2015: 9,747,355) (Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average of the total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate in the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). With 1.67, Sweden is well above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)⁵.

Children under age 6

Table 5

Sweden: Children under 6 years of age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Under age 1	114,663
1 year-olds	115,050
2 year-olds	117,612
3 year-olds	120,049
4 year-olds	121,060
5 year-olds	125,441
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	713,875

In 2022, children under age 3 comprised 3.3% of the total population, and children under 6 years of age 6.8%. Particularly during the past seven years, these shares have been significantly higher than the respective EU-average.

Table 6

Sweden: Distribution of under 6 year-olds in population by age compared with EU averages, 2000 to 2022/23, in %*

Year	Comparison Sweden/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Sweden	3.0	3.5	6.6
	Ø EU15 ⁶	3.2	3.2	6.4

⁵ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>); data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

⁶ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional

Year	Comparison Sweden/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2005	Sweden	3.3	3.1	6.4
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Sweden	3.6	3.6	7.2
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Sweden	3.3	3.5	6.8
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a; * own calculations, deviations due to roundings

Single households with children under age 6

In 2022, 94.4% of households in Sweden with children under age 6 were couple households. Single households accounted for only 2.5% of all households. The majority of these were single mother households (1.8%).

Table 7

Sweden: Households with children under 6 years old, 2022

Household type	Number of households	Households in per cent*
Households total	1,037,800	
Couple households	979,800	94.4
Other types of households	32,000	3.1
Single parent households, total	26,000	2.5
Single parent households, women	18,200	1.8
Single parent households, men	7,800	0.8

Source: Eurostat 2023i, *own calculation

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In 2022, the total employment rate for men in Sweden aged 15 to 65 years was 85.5%, for women 81.3% (Eurostat 2023 h).

In 2022, 81.5% of women and 95.1% of men with children under 6 were in employment. The share of employed fathers was thus the highest among the EU27(2020) (average: 87.2%), that of mothers the second highest (average: 63.6%) (Eurostat 2023e, own calculations).

Table 8a

Sweden: Employment rates of parents with children below age 6 compared with SEEPRO-3 countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
Sweden	75.2	91.6
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁷	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7

EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

⁷ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

	2022	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
Sweden	81.5	95.1
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU- countries ⁸	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023e

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 8b*.

Table 8b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023) with dependent children	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with children under 2 years	72.4	93.1	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children 3–4 years	70.7	95.0		

*Eurostat 2023e, 2023h

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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⁸ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁹

In 2022, 21.4% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was slightly below the EU27 average (23,3%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 18.6% (EU: 21.6%). In 2020, 5% of children under 6 and 2.5% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023f, g).

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⁹ 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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