

**The United Nations 2002 Special Session on Children  
World Fit for Children Plan of Action; +5 review**

**National Progress Report: FINLAND  
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## 1. Introduction

Several ministries, agencies and NGO's in Finland have contributed to this report.

### **National Plan of Action – A Finland Fit for Children**

In 2003 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health set up a National Committee on the Rights of the Child to compile a national plan of action based on the World Fit for Children (WFFC) targets. Representatives of the ministries central for children's affairs, research and development institutes, key national children's organisations, the provinces as well as the two state churches took part in the committee work. The Committee completed its work in 2005.

The Committee considered not expedient to compile the National Plan of Action in accordance with the structure of the final document, but the National Plan of Action; A Finland Fit for Children. The report is attached.

The National Plan of Action defines key child policy goals and proposed revisions on issues concerning children. It underlines that best interests of the child must be considered both in legislation and in administration.

The Plan of Action focuses attention to the growing role of the media in society. According to the Plan of Action proposals, the society must increase the media's responsibilities in protecting children from harmful advertising and violent entertainment. Also, the participation of children in accordance with their development in decisions that concern children should be increased.

The Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child proposed that an office of Ombudsman for Children should be established. Ms. Maria Kaisa Aula took the office of Ombudsman for Children on 1 September 2005. The Committee also included making proposals on permanent national coordination of child and family affairs. The Advisory Board on the Rights of the Child initiated its work in autumn 2006.

The Committee also proposed that the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (Stakes) should develop child impact assessment. This work has been recently completed.

In addition to the National Plan of Action, several programmes on children has been carried out in recent years in other administrative sectors, including the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care, the National Curriculum Guidelines for Comprehensive Education, the guidelines and quality recommendations for school health care as well as various guidebooks distributed at child care clinics.

NGOs are an important resource and significant partners in promoting the wellbeing of children.

## **2. Major National Actions taken for Children and towards the WFFC targets since 2002.**

## 1. National Plan of Action goals and their implementation

The major national action in Finland has been the adoption of the National Plan “*A Finland Fit for Children*”, published by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2005:7). The Ministry of Justice has been represented in the Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child. The plan has been taken into the account in all activities concerning children within the competence area of the Ministry.

### Goal 1: The child receives love and care at home

The goal incorporates improving parenting and custody, developing skills of responsible parenthood and of being a parent, reconciling the family’s timetables, and developing peer support for parents. A majority of the children have good parents and can enjoy a good and happy childhood.

Although the majority of parents fare well in their task and are able to provide their children a good and safe growing environment, some parents are, however, challenged by the tasks of parenting with the potential result of reduced wellbeing of their children. The child’s right to wellbeing and healthy living environment even when the parents’ resources are inadequate must be based the best interests of the child. The wellbeing of the child requires a constant revision and updating of the legislation concerning children.

The child policy should build upon the parents’ responsibilities for child upbringing. The Government, the municipalities as well as organisations and parishes should support families in this task. The society bears a responsibility for the wellbeing of all children.

The Plan of Action initiatives are based on changes in society that have affected children’s status and living environment. The full participation of both parents in working life and the growing demands of working life require improvements in the opportunities to reconcile child upbringing and other family life with the parents’ work. Developing child day care is one solution.

#### Prenatal and child care clinics

Prenatal and child care clinics support early interaction between the child and the parent. This enhances the parent’s ability to understand and accept the child’s feelings and needs and to be available emotionally. According to a national review of prenatal and child care clinics conducted in 2005, support for early interaction has progressed well and nearly all nurses have received additional training on the matter.

Impact assessments show that training has increased the mothers’ sensitivity to their children’s needs as well as the nurses’ abilities to support early interaction and to bring up difficult issues for discussion. All expecting parents receive the guidebook “*Meille tulee vauva*” (We’ll have a baby), which gives the parents information on the importance of early interaction for example. At the child care clinics the parents receive information leaflets on the different ages of the child that discuss issues linked to the particular development stage of the child.

In addition to early interaction, the parents are provided guidance on child-oriented upbringing that focuses on love and care on one hand and on boundaries on the other hand. Research shows that this kind of support enhances the positive development of the child as well as the child's performance in school.

More attention has been paid to breastfeeding in accordance with WHO and UNICEF guidelines. A working group will be soon established at the National Public Health Institute to compile a national plan of action for the promotion of breastfeeding.

Prenatal and child care clinics have been instructed to establish peer groups for parents before and after childbirth where the parents can get useful information and peer support from other parents. Good practices have been developed and reports on them have been compiled and distributed nationally.

The attention of prenatal and child care staff as well as parents have been increasingly drawn to the role and significance of the father as well as to the support for fathers. In 2006, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health compiled a report on the support for fathers provided by prenatal and child care clinics.

Child care clinics have intensified their family work and focused increasingly on support for parenting and the couple relationships. This encompasses appreciation of the child's needs, promotion of the wellbeing of the parents as well as early intervention in problem situations.

Intimate partner violence is discussed at the clinics with the help of a screening form designed for the purpose. Prenatal and child care clinics have been given guidance on how to identify parents' alcohol abuse, how to discuss the problem with them and how to refer parents to care if necessary. Less than half of the health centres have agreed on care chains for referring mothers with substance abuse problems to care. More attention has also been paid to identifying depression in mothers. Around half of the nurses and physicians use a screening form to identify depressed mothers regularly or when necessary.

## The system of parental leaves

The Finnish family policy aims to create a safe environment for children to grow up in and to provide parents with the material and psychological means to have and raise children. Ultimately this comes down to supporting parenthood and families.

The system of parental leaves has been developed determinedly in order to ease out the reconciliation of work and family.

The underlying premise of the family leave system is to give both parents equal opportunities to participate in childcare at home.

In addition the benefits paid to families have been increased somewhat in order to prevent and reduce poverty and social exclusion among children and families with children.

## **Goal 2: The child has safe and long-lasting relationship and an environment that reinforces a sense of security**

The goal includes improving the security of close relationships in early childhood education and care and comprehensive education as well as considering the safety of the child when the living environment is being developed.

In school health care, the focus is especially on collaboration between the home and the school. The quality recommendation for school health care commends that each and every school community compile a plan for student welfare services that specifies the school community's activities to promote health and safety, the provision of general and special support for pupils within pupil welfare services as well as models for action in problem, accident and crisis situations, such as absenteeism, bullying, violence and harassment, mental health issues, smoking and substance abuse, different kinds of accidents as well as fatalities. The aim is to make home visits to families with children as often as possible.

### The Early Childhood Education and Care

In 2003 a National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was compiled in order to steer the contents. The ECEC is based on a Government resolution of 2002 and revised in 2005 after an extensive consultation process. The early Childhood Education and Care seeks to emphasise the so-called ECEC partnership, which means the conscious commitment of parents and personnel to share the task of supporting the growing-up, development and learning processes of the child.

### The Comprehensive Education

The revised National Curriculum Guidelines for Comprehensive Education also emphasises cooperation between the home and the school. The cooperation can be carried out for example in the form of school clubs and they should support the day-to-day education and care provided at home and in school as well as to increase the social inclusion of children and adolescents.

As commercial media supply increases and the media technologies develop we need more effective means to protect children from media contents that can harm the child's development. Scattered legislation regarding the media must be made more technology-neutral. Media corporations must be encouraged to more comprehensive self-regulation in the field of child protection. This should also be supported with public funds.

## **Goal 3: The child has the basic and special services he or she needs and guaranteed income**

The Finnish social welfare and health care system aims at providing the necessary social and health services to each and everyone on an equal basis irrespective of socio-economic status or place of residence. All families with children have an equal opportunity

to free-of-charge prenatal and childcare services close to their place of residence. Studies show that nearly all parents use the prenatal and childcare services.

The Development and Research Centre for Maternity and Child Health Care was established in 2002. The Centre studies, develops and supports prenatal and child care clinics to reinforce families' resources and other prerequisites for a healthy life.

In 2004 published the guidebook for ECEC staff to develop the early support. The specific tool can be used to identify the child's needs as well as to develop the day-to-day education and care in accordance with the early support approach. The tool consists of sixteen themes based on topical and hands-on needs. Each theme consists of a framework for discussion that guides the staff to choose an appropriate theme and to compile a development plan. The core idea of the development tool is dialogue, i.e., seeking a common understanding on the contents of, the need for and the ways to develop early support.

The ECEC emphasises the child's right to his or her own culture and way of living. Finland is bilingual, Finnish and Swedish speaking country. In Finland, the minority languages include three different Sámi languages as well as Romani. The National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC highlight the need to cooperate with the representatives of both the Sámi and Roma cultures.

## **Legislative reforms**

### The Substitute care

The need for foster care has increased in Finland in recent years. This can be explained with both increasing alcohol use among parents and adolescents as well as mental health problems among parents. Alcohol use is increasing because of a cut in alcohol taxes and prices, which are obligatory measures in order to harmonise alcohol prices in Finland with other EU Member States. The Government has launched programmes to contain the abuse of alcohol and to prevent mental health problems.

In order to improve the child's legal protection, provisions on the restrictions applied in substitute care have been specified and complemented. The reform entered into force on 1 November 2006.

The aim of the reform is to improve the legal protection of child welfare clients, children in particular, and child welfare professionals by updating the Child Welfare Act, with regard to the precision and the clear boundaries of restriction authority, to better correspond to the existing provisions on human rights and fundamental freedoms. The aim is also to clarify the distinction between the boundaries in child upbringing and the restrictions regulated in the Child Welfare Act. The specified provisions facilitate a better application of the provisions in practice and thus promote the equality of children.

### Child Welfare Act

The total reform of the Child Welfare Act is under preparation. The Government submitted the Bill on a revised Child Welfare Act to the Parliament on 3 November 2006.

A key objective of the Child Welfare Act reform is to safeguard the consideration of the rights and the best interests of the child are considered in child welfare. The aim is to make sure that children and their families get the support and services they need especially in situations where the wellbeing or development of the child is threatened. The aim is also to support parents after their child has been taken into care. Another goal is to safeguard the equality of children and their families irrespective of their place of residence.

The revised Child Welfare Act gives precise definitions on the preparations for and the process of taking a child into care. The status of the child in substitute care will be improved. Also provisions safeguarding good quality substitute care have been proposed. Provisions on taking a child into care against his or her will are included in the Government Bill regarding administrative courts. According to the existing legislation, the municipal social board decides on taking a child into care against his or her will.

Also the views and wishes of the child must be examined irrespective of the child's age in all undertaking of child welfare measures. The child will also be explained the plans, measures and timetables concerning him or her in a way which is suitable with regard to the child's age and level of maturity. Regarding the child's right to a say, the Bill proposes that the age limit for a general right to a say is retained at 15 years of age in accordance with the existing provisions. Accordingly, a 15-year-old child is entitled to a say in child welfare measures concerning him or herself. The child's guardian has a parallel right to a say.

According to the Bill, even children aged 12 years or more have the right to exercise the right to speak independently along side the guardian in matters concerning emergency care orders, taking into care, substitute care, continued taking into care and access to parents. The child's right to a say includes also the right to appeal. The Bill proposes that the child's status when his or her case is being dealt with by an administrative authority or a court is improved for example with regard to hearing the child personally. The child could be heard personally in a court if it was necessary for reaching a decision on the case and if the child consents to being heard and if the process does not cause any harm to the child.

### The Child Daycare Act

In order to reduce the need for substitute care and to create daycare resources for children in need of special support the Parliament has adopted a revision of the Child Daycare Act, which will enter into force on 1 January 2007. According to the revised act, the municipalities must hire an adequate number of special kindergarten teachers in daycare centres.

In order to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation, the Government has submitted a proposal for restrictions on the distribution of child pornography. The objective of the proposal is to ensure that the police can hand over a list of webpages maintained abroad that contain child pornography material to the teleoperators. Teleoperators have announced their willingness to voluntarily initiate measures to prevent the distribution of child pornography from abroad.

### The Primary Health Care Act

The Primary Health Care Act provides that the municipalities answer for providing health care services for children, adolescents and families with children, including prenatal and child care services, school health care services, and student health care services. provides only a framework and does not specifically define the contents of the services.

Regarding child care clinics and school health care, the municipalities have been guided with information steering. The information steering has included a guidebook for child care clinics as well as a guidebook and a quality recommendation on school health care. Surveys show, however, that the child health care services for which the municipalities are responsible are not carried out in accordance with the guidelines.

For example, the child care clinics for families with children under school age should be a part of the municipal network providing services for families with children. The clinics should also cooperate with social welfare authorities. In addition to regular and screening studies, the child care clinics should utilise established good practices, such as home calls, peer groups for parents and support for parents in choosing life styles that promote health.

The Primary Health Care Act was revised in 2005 by including in the act municipal monitoring of health status and health determinants by population groups. The Act also provides that a Government degree can be ordained regarding prenatal and child care clinics and school health care services. Preparations for the degree will be initiated in 2007 with the purpose of more precise provisions on the contents and amounts of health services for children and adolescents. The degree also specifies the municipalities' obligations.

### The Primary Education Act

In 2004 the revision of the Primary Education Act extended the provisions on subsidised transport for pupils to also apply to pre-school children. According to the act, a pre-school child has the right to free-of-charge transport if the school journey is too difficult, straining or dangerous for the child considering his or her age and other circumstances.

The Primary Education Act was revised with regards to morning and afternoon activities, the purpose of which is to guide students to leisure-time activities and to children to hobbies that promote the child's development. The revised act stipulates that the municipality can provide morning and afternoon activities by itself or in cooperation with other municipalities or by purchasing the services from other public or private service providers. The municipality can also purchase such services by granting assistance to the service provider. The organisation of morning and afternoon activities must take into consideration the needs of different language groups. The municipality bears the responsibility that the services it purchases are provided in accordance with the aforementioned act. The organisation of morning and afternoon activities must take into consideration that also children entitled to free-of-charge transportation have the opportunity to participate.

### The Act on the Ombudsman for Children

For the promotion of the rights of the child, was enacted in 2004 establishing a state-funded post and office of the Ombudsman for Children. The functions of the Ombudsman are based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ombudsman for Chil-

dren works in cooperation with other authorities, experts and other actors promoting the status and rights of the child such as organisations. The Ombudsman's tasks include the promotion of the child's best interests and rights at the level of general administration, societal policy and legislation as well as the enhancement of the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Ombudsman should also introduce children's own views to the public debate and distribute information about the rights of the child also to the children themselves. The Ombudsman for Children can take initiative on the status of children and defects in society regarding children. The Ombudsman is an independent actor who has access to a wide range of expertise in different administrative sectors. The Ombudsman for Children does not deal with individuals' cases.

#### **Goal 4: The child enjoys increased participation in everyday situations**

The goal incorporates improving the hearing and the participation of the child and improving the child's possibilities to influence his or her living environment.

A school health survey is conducted every other year on adolescents aged 14–18 years. The students are asked for example whether the teachers encourage students to express their opinions, whether students' opinions are taken into consideration, and whether students' opinions are listened to in school in general. On a more general level it can be stated that in these issues there is still room for improvement in school. The students are also asked about their views on their health and symptoms.

#### **Goal 5: The rights of the child are widely known**

The rights of the child are mentioned in the guidebook for child care clinics and the entire Convention on the Rights of the Child is available online at the webpages of the Development and Research Centre for Maternity and Child Health Care. Stakes organises training events for personnel working with children and families where information on the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is systematically provided. For example the training sessions for municipal ECEC staff have the Convention on the Rights of the Child as one of the core themes.

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities has enhanced the municipalities' knowledge of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It has also encouraged the municipalities to adopt the Convention as the basis for their child policy. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities recommended in 2000 that the municipalities compile their child policy programmes on the basis of the Convention and that the municipalities' plans should implicitly consider the goals for promoting the implementation of the Convention in different administrative fields in the municipalities. In order to promote the child policy process, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities has in 2000–2005 implemented three comprehensive national projects: in 2000–2003 a project on municipal child policy supported municipalities in the compilation of child policy programmes; a project on developing the service system and services for children was carried out in 2000–2004; and a project aiming at promoting communities' upbringing responsibilities was implemented in 2001–2005.

#### **Development projects**

In order to support the National Plan of Action goals: A Finland Fit for Children the development projects is to create new practices and to permanently improve the effectiveness of the system.

Several changes have taken place in children's growing environment during the last decade. In early 1990s, Finland went through an unparalleled economic recession with an 11 per cent decrease in the GDP in 1990–1993. Even now in the 21st century, the effects of the recession can still be seen in the society. Unemployment continues to be high and as economic growth began again in mid 1990s, income differences have grown. High unemployment and structural changes have increased the share of low-income families with children or families with children living below the poverty threshold. Changes in children's environment have led to an increased need for special measures within ECEC, special teaching and substitute care.

The Government has responded to these problems by establishing broad-based development projects that cover the whole of the social welfare and health care sector. Most of the new development activities have been used to improve both the families' prerequisites to child upbringing and the children's growing environment. EUR 80 million was allocated in 2004–2006 to development projects in the field of social welfare, out of which EUR 30 million was given to projects on children, adolescents and families. The objective of the development projects is to create best practices and wellbeing of children and families. The projects continue until 2007.

The development project on early intervention development project on early intervention

The Government goal is to apply the principle of early intervention in the prevention of social problems. According to the principle, threats to children's growth and parents' problems in upbringing should be recognised early on and enough means and resources of professional assistance should be provided for parents. A development project on early intervention was established for the implementation of the principle in securing healthy environments for children. The goal of the project is to permanently integrate good practices of early intervention and cooperation structures into the work of professionals and units working with children, adolescents and families. The project is carried out by the municipalities, Stakes and the Central Union for Child Welfare. The development programmes on ECEC and child welfare have the same objective. Another project focusing on improving children's growing environment aims at promoting positive attitudes towards families and children in society, improving the subsistence of families with children and establishing and maintaining family centres where families can meet each other.

A national family project

A national family project (2004–2007) aims at reinforcing parenting, securing healthy growing and development of the child, and increasing the wellbeing of families. Within the project, the culture and methods of action in basic services for children and families with children are reformed. The objective is to create permanent models for action. Cooperation structures for prevention and early intervention are revised and networks of services for families with children are promoted. The objective is to create a local-level network of family services or a model for action for family centres that is based on more intensified cooperation between different actors (different administrations in the public sector, or-

ganisations and the private sector) and on the utilisation of the strengths of families and peer support.

#### The project on well-functioning children and families

Mental health disturbances of a parent are reflected in the entire family. Every-day chores and interaction may suffer and problems may occur in children's development. A Stakes project on well-functioning children and families develops measures for social welfare and health care as well as education administration that support families and children and prevent disturbances with children. The method *Speak about the children* means that the staff counsels and discusses with the parents on matters concerning children. The method *Preventive family intervention* (Beardslee Preventive Family Intervention) includes work with the parents and the children as well as a concluding joint family session. The parents are provided support in informing the children of the parents' problems and of what is going on in the family.

New media (the Internet, mobile phones, game consoles) have rapidly evolved into an important learning environment for children and adolescents. However, many parents are unfamiliar with children's new media environment. A number of projects by national children's organisations have created opportunities for parents to improve their knowledge of children's media environment, provided means to improve children's media skills and increased interaction between children and parents with regard to the use of media.

#### The project on a multi-cultural action model for ECEC

In early 2006, there were around 110,000 foreign citizens living in Finland. Around 27,000 of them are refugees. Finland has immigrants from 171 countries. The immigrant population has grown fast. During the last decade it has doubled. Several development projects to improve the growing environment of immigrant children have been launched in municipalities with a considerable immigrant population. In 2005, the municipalities in the metropolitan area started a project to develop a multi-cultural action model for ECEC. The project aims at promoting the comprehensive wellbeing and social strengthening of immigrant children especially by developing methods linked to ECEC and to language education both in the child's mother tongue and in Finnish.

#### The project on early childhood education and care for Roma children

For centuries a small Roma minority has been living in Finland. At the moment there are about 10,000 Roma in Finland. The educational level of Roma children is lower than for the majority of the population. Roma children are more frequently assigned to special teaching classes and still a part of the Roma children drop out of school. One explanation for the poor school performance of Roma children is their limited vocabulary and usage of Finnish as their mother tongue. For alleviating these problems a project on early childhood education and care for Roma children has been carried out in 2005–2006. The goal of the project is to integrate ECEC services in the Roma population through cooperation between parents, relatives and municipal officials.

#### The social emergency system

Social emergency services have been developed in order to respond to urgent problems in child upbringing and other emergency situations. A social emergency system for the entire country should be in place by 2007. Accordingly, new systems for organising emergency social services have been developed in cooperation with municipalities, authorities and actors in the third and private sectors.

### 3. Resource trends for children

The amount of all unpaid child maintenance allowances to be recovered from a parent not living with the child exceeded nearly 268 million euros in 2005. The fact may partly be caused by the difficulties in defining the amount to be paid by a parent as maintenance allowance. Therefore, guidelines for defining the amount of the allowances have been prepared by a working group of the Ministry of Justice. These guidelines will most probably be adopted and published at the beginning of next year. They are expected to help both the parents and authorities to find a correct balance between the parents in their duty of maintaining the child. The guidelines will have an indirect influence on the child's standard of living, which in some cases may be considerable.

The share of families with children in the lowest income categories increased in Finland in the 1990s. This seems to be linked to broader changes in income distribution in the 1990s where young people have moved downwards compared to older generations. However, families' movement down the income ladder can be better explained with economic polarisation than with a general poor income development among families.

In 1990–2002, income development was either good or moderate in the majority of families with children. Income development has been very good among two-parent families with one or two children. Similarly, the trend has been positive in families where the youngest child is already at school. However, the income trends have been weaker for families with several children, for single-parent families and for families where there is a child under three years of age. Income development has been particularly poor among single-parent families.

Relative poverty has increased more quickly among children than in the whole population. In 2003, the relative poverty rate for children was for the first time higher than for the whole population. 12 per cent of the children are classified as poor in accordance with the relative poverty line compared to 11 per cent of the entire population. In early 1990s poverty among children was considerably less common than among the population at large.

The strong growth of economic inequality among families with children in 1990–2002 can to a large extent be explained by instability at the labour market and increasing difficulties to get employment. This concerns especially the new generations that entered the labour market after the recession, that is, increasingly parents of small children. On average the income transfers to families with children have declined about 10 per cent after the recession, which in particular has had negative impact on the income of low-income families with children. This decline is partly the result of cuts in the level of benefits and partly the decrease in earnings-related income transfers due to growing unemployment.

Improving the financial status of families with children, supporting parenting and promoting the wellbeing of children and adolescents have since 2003 been among the Government's priority action areas. In 2005, services and income transfers for families with chil-

dren accounted for approximately EUR 5.2 billion, i.e. 3.3 per cent of the GDP. Families with children get the most support through child allowance and daycare.

In 2005, the level of benefits for families rose to the level of early 1990s. Especially the society's support for services for families with children has increased. This can be explained with the expansion of the right to child daycare, the reform of pre-school education and the development of afternoon activities for school children. However, income transfers to families with children are still at a lower level than before the recession in the 1990s. In recent years the cuts in the resources municipalities allocate to prenatal and child care clinics and school health care have stagnated.

In order to improve the financial status of families with children the level of some benefits has been increased: the level of child benefit for the first child and the raise in the child benefit of single-parent households was increased in early 2004. At the outset of 2005 the minimum level of parental daily allowance was raised. A significant reform regarding mothers is that the parental daily allowance for successive births can be defined according to the income that formed the basis for the preceding parental daily allowance. Also the level of home care allowance and private day care allowance was raised in 2005. The level of partial care allowance has been raised and the right for the allowance has been expanded to the parents of school children on 1st and 2nd grades.

The budget for 2007 will improve the possibilities to receive private daycare allowance for the sibling of a child that receives home care allowance. An adoptive parent's right to home care allowance is expanded and the period of parental allowance for adoptive parents is extended.

#### The child benefit and partial care allowance

Financial support for families with children was improved in early 2004 by raising the level of child benefit and partial care allowance. The child benefit for the first child is EUR 100 per calendar month (EUR 90 in 2003), for the second child EUR 110.50, for the third child EUR 131, for the fourth child EUR 151.50, and for each additional child EUR 172 per month. Single parents receive an additional EUR 36.60 per month per child (EUR 33.60 in 2003).

#### The partial care allowance

The partial care allowance was raised to EUR 70 at the outset of 2004. Partial care allowance is paid to parents who cut down their daily or weekly working hours in order to care for their child. Entitlement to partial care allowance was extended to include even parents whose child is in first or second grade of comprehensive school. Also parents whose child takes part in statutory pre-school education have the right to partial care allowance. The parents of children whose compulsory education has been extended are entitled to partial care allowance even during the child's third year in comprehensive school. Partial care allowance can be paid to both the parents even if both of them have worked reduced hours during the same calendar month.

#### The child home care allowance; the minimum parental daily allowance

The child home care allowance and the minimum parental daily allowance were raised at the outset of 2005. The child home care allowance for one child was increased with EUR 42 and is now EUR 294.28 per month. The private care allowance was raised with EUR 19.60 and is now EUR 137.33 per month.

#### A pensions reform

A pensions reform entered into force in 2005 providing that each parent earning at least EUR 12,918.57 per year (in 2005) at some point before applying for pension has the right to receive pension also for child care periods. Pension accrues during maternal, paternal, and parental allowance periods. The pension is based on 117 per cent of the income that forms the basis for maternal, paternal, and parental allowance, yet no less than EUR 538.27 per month. After the parental allowance period, the pension can even accrue during child care periods until the child turns three years of age. This requires that the parent receives child home care allowance and that the parent who receives the allowance also takes care of the child. The pension accruing after the parental allowance period is based on a monthly income of EUR 538.27. A fixed sum is applied since the benefit is not earnings-related.

From 2005 onwards pensions is earned even by students during studies leading to a degree and by parents who take care of their child at home when the child is under three years of age.

#### The Health Insurance Act

The Health Insurance Act was revised in early 2005. The minimum amount of maternal, paternal, parental and special maternal allowance was raised from EUR 11.45 to EUR 15.20 per day. The increase is thus nearly EUR 94 per month. The employers' expenses caused by parental leaves are evened out by increasing the compensation paid to employers for annual leave expenses from the year 2005.

The working group reviewing the costs of family leaves gave its proposal for evening out the costs of family leaves in March 2006. In order to improve the labour market position of women, the employers' expenses caused by family leaves are evened out and fathers are encouraged to take more family leave.

#### The family leave campaign

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health will launch a family leave campaign in early 2007 in collaboration with the social partners with the aim of raising awareness of family leave reforms and encouraging fathers to take more family leave. The campaign also aims at a general attitude change that would support the fathers' participation in the care and everyday life of their children.

#### The parental allowance

From the outset of 2007, the parental allowance will constitute 75 per cent of a parent's wages instead of the present 70 per cent. If both parents utilise parental leave, both of them receive the increased allowance during the first 30 weekdays. The maternal allowance is raised to 90 per cent of wages for the first 56 weekdays and the use of the so-

called father's month becomes more flexible. If the employer pays wages during the parental allowance period, the employer receives a higher compensation.

#### The special child care allowance

The level of social security for those who receive special child care allowance or special allowance for persons with disabilities will be raised from the outset of 2007. The special child care allowance is reserved for those children with severe disabilities whose care and rehabilitation cause a considerable financial burden due to the child's nearly constant need of assistance and supervision. At the outset of 2007, the special child care allowance and the special allowance for persons with disabilities is raised to EUR 361.21 per month (EUR 340.03 in 2006).

#### The responsibilities of the municipalities

The municipalities answer for the provision of social welfare and health care services. The services are funded with local taxes levied by the municipalities and with subsidies allocated to them by the Government. Client fees are also collected for social welfare and health care services. In recent years the state subsidies to municipalities have increased somewhat. In 2006 the state's share of operating costs in social welfare and health care was around 33 per cent.

The positive employment trend and decreased taxation have improved the financial status of families with children. However, the number of families living below the poverty threshold has not decreased. Poverty is more prevalent especially among single-parent households and families with several children. In 2004, 136,000 children lived in low-income families while around 12 per cent of all children under 18 years of age were from families living below the poverty threshold.

The goal is to halt the growth of child poverty and turn the trend downwards. The Government's economic policy to decrease taxes and reduce public sector expenditure has created a momentum for new economic growth. The possibilities for new growth are step by step reflected both in an accelerating increase in income levels and in a decrease in the numbers of low-income families.

The present Government has presented its budget proposal for 2007, which has been complemented on 17 November 2006. The existing framework decision on spending limits is valid for 2007–2011 and it defines the use and allocation of resources. The level of expenditure for 2008–2011 is based on the decisions of the present Government. It will make preliminary decisions on the frameworks for 2008–2011 in March 2007. However, the appropriations level for the next term of office will be defined by the Government, which takes office after the parliamentary elections in March 2007.

Figure 1. Benefits for families in 1990–2005, year 2005 prices, EUR child/year

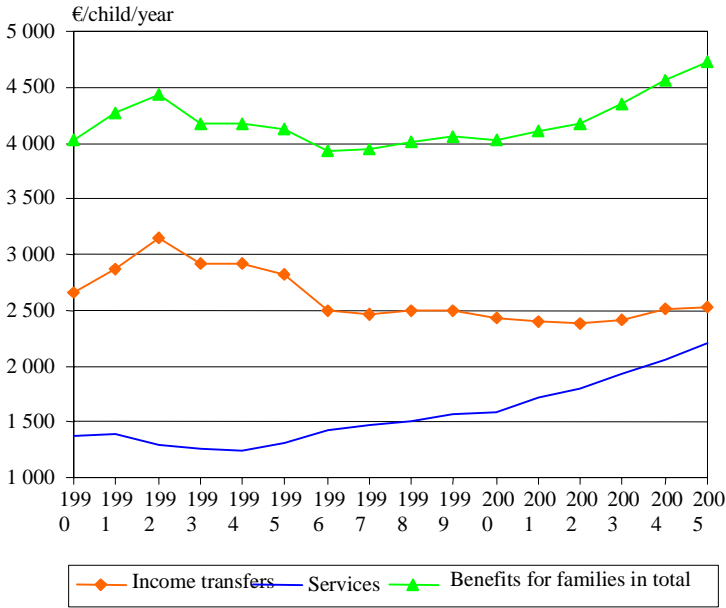


Figure 2. Share of families with children below the low-income threshold in 1990–2003. Low income threshold 60 per cent of median income.

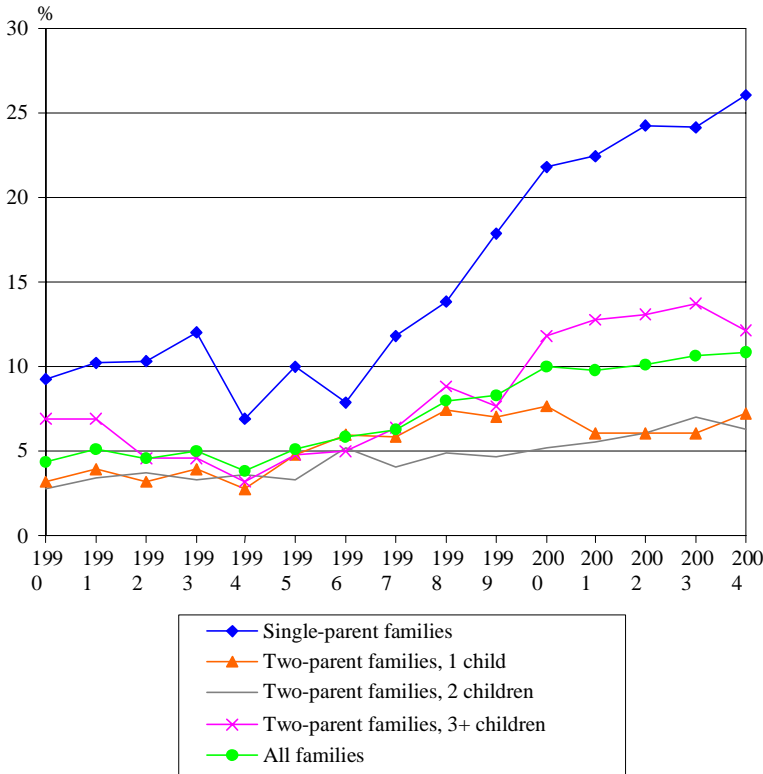
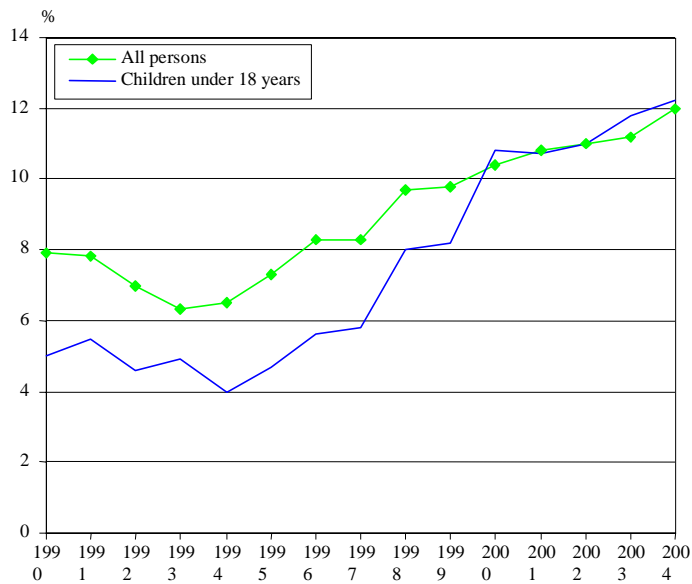


Figure 3. Share of the population and children below the low-income threshold in 1990–2004. Low income threshold 60 per cent of median income.



#### 4. Development and use of monitoring instruments to track WFFC/MDG targets

##### Knowledge 2005

Statistics Finland and the Stakes collect basic data on the living conditions and wellbeing of children and adolescents. A broad-based national development project in the field of social welfare includes the project TIETO 2005 (Knowledge 2005) which develops indicators of the wellbeing of children and adolescents and which is carried out in collaboration between Statistics Finland, Stakes and municipalities. STAKES:sissa. The main objective of the project is to create new and permanent data system architecture for statistics and registers at Stakes, to reform the processing and action principles of statistics production and to create a revised process-oriented model for action.

##### The SOTKANet bank

The SOTKANet bank of indicators maintained by Stakes includes also indicators of the wellbeing of children and adolescents. They are based on data collected from municipalities on health, use of services and problems among children and adolescents. The objective is to expand the data collection especially with the help of statistics on outpatient care in health care. Stakes has in collaboration with the National Public Health Institute carried out a review defining key data contents for the development of the follow-up of the health of children and adolescents and of the statistics on outpatient care of children. The data contents of the child welfare register and statistics are being developed to correspond the data required by the reformed Child Welfare Act. Stakes also maintains a follow-up and assessment system concerning the quality and efficiency of early childhood education and care.

Stakes performs an annual school health care survey on nearly all the school children aged 15–16 years. The survey studies for example children's health behaviour and health status, their experiences and conceptions of the school atmosphere and different kinds of problems experienced by them. Stakes takes part in the ESPAD research that every

fourth year by using a standard method collects data on substance abuse and the health of children aged 15–16 years in 25 European countries.

## 5. Enhancing partnerships, alliance for children and participation

The Finnish legislation widely acknowledges the principle, according to which a child's opinion shall be taken into consideration in matters concerning him or her. Lately certain Acts were adopted in which this principle has found its application.

A child aged 15 or more has the right to be heard separately and parallel to his or her custodian or other legal representative in a matter concerning the child's personal affairs or personal rights and interests. This right of a child was preserved (section 13) in the new Administrative Procedure Act (343/2003).

Children's possibilities to participate in decision making were increased in matters concerning religious affiliation. According to the new Freedom of Religion Act (453/2003) the religious affiliation of a child aged 12 or more, may only be changed with the child's consent. A child aged 15 or more may change his or her affiliation with the custodians' written consent (section 3).<sup>1</sup>

In the new Act concerning judicial mediation of disputes in districts courts (663/2005) a child's right to be heard in the mediation concerning his or her custody or right of access has been ensured in the same way as in disputes which fall under the Child Custody and Right of Access Act (361/1983). The latter stipulates that the child's opinion is to be taken into consideration when confirming agreements of his or her parents or deciding about child custody disputes at court (sections 8, 9 and 11). It is the duty of the mediator to ensure also that the mediation takes place in accordance with the best interests of the child (Act Concerning Judicial Mediation, Section 18).

### National cooperation

Implementing child policy and improving the growing and living environment of children has been carried out in a broad-based collaboration between the national, regional, and local levels. At the national level, the Advisory Board on Early Childhood Education and Care has been the cooperation body for different administrative sectors, occupational and civic organisations as well as parishes. The aim of the Advisory Board is to support and promote broad-based development of ECEC by anticipating future needs and by compiling visions for the implementation and development of ECEC. Creating a vision for ECEC requires an assessment of the present situation of ECEC nationally and internationally as well as an estimation of future developments.

During its term of office, the Advisory Board maps out and assesses the present situation of ECEC on the basis of which it also compiles a vision for the future of ECEC. The Advisory Board has invited permanent or temporary experts and set up divisions within the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board aims at discussing key and topical themes from the perspective of the future vision for ECEC.

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<sup>1</sup> This law reform was prepared in the Ministry of Education.

The Advisory Board collects data on ECEC and emerging development needs from different actors' current research and development projects, reports, assessments and other measures that have national significance and that have fundamental impact on ECEC.

In the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, there is an Advisory Board, appointed by the Government, with the task of assisting the Ombudsman in building cooperation with authorities and NGOs. The Advisory Board's basic task is to promote cooperation between different authorities and other actors to do with the situation and rights of the child. Hence the Advisory Board also response to a more general need to coordinate child policy. The goal is that the Advisory Board supports the work of the Ombudsman for Children. It could also discuss and give feed back regarding the Ombudsman's action plan and annual report. Regarding the action plan, it is important to create networks and contacts to different administrative sectors. The Advisory Board's tasks highlight also its role in promoting international cooperation and in reviewing international developments. In this way, the Advisory Board also takes part in the follow-up on the realisation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

#### Local cooperation

In 2005 there were a total of 67 development projects concerning the cooperation among families and between the social welfare and health care staff. Most of the municipalities took part in the projects and nearly all of the projects also included local organisations for children and adolescents. One of these projects was a partnership project for creating family centre activities. In 2006 the project included 63 municipalities in a total of 17 sub-projects. New municipalities are in the process of joining the project during its concluding year 2007. Cooperation based on partnerships is also developed in many other Finnish municipalities.

A family centre is based on partnership and gathers services for families into a network of activities. The services included in the network are provided by prenatal and child are clinics, daycare, school as well as the family services of organisations and parishes. The activities are family-oriented and preventive and they promote the wellbeing of families. The objective is to incorporate structures of prevention and early support into the basic services for families in order to support parenting. The assumption is that peer support helps parents to improve their parenting. The family service staff need from time to time also the expertise and assistance of experts in different sectors. Family centres create working practices for this cooperation. The most important aspect of the family centres is that the neighbourhood has a location for families to meet.

The general goal of the partnership project for family services is to reinforce parenting and increase the wellbeing of families. Accordingly, the project aims at improving the structures and activities of family services in national, regional and local cooperation between different administrative sectors and other actors. The objective is a local network of family services or a family centre that is based on intensified cooperation partnership between different actors – such as the public sector, families, organisations, voluntary actors, parishes and possibly even the private sector – as well as on the utilisation of the strengths, resources and peer support of families. At the same time the goal is to reinforce the society's positive attitudes towards children and families, increase joint respon-

sibilities for safeguarding a healthy growing environment for children and to promote local communality.

In municipalities the development of services is based on the municipal council's visions, ideas for action, values and strategic goals. The municipal administration prepares budgets and reforms the structures for family services on the basis of the budget. The objective in developing the service structure is to enable cross-sectoral activities (especially in social welfare, health care and education) and client-oriented coordination of services. The goal is to intensify cooperation also with broader networks (such as youth work, physical activities, culture and the police). At present municipal service structures are often organised according to sectors and they do not consider enough the whole life cycle of the clients. Crossing administrative boundaries is one means of incorporating the life-cycle approach into the planning and implementation of services.

In addition to municipal actors the local level has also a wide range of other actors. Families have thus access to a wide range of functioning family services across the municipality. The municipality's task is to increase families' awareness of the available services. The purpose of pooling family services together is to create a functioning entity of basic services for each and everyone in cooperation with municipal services for children and families with children, social welfare, health care and education staff working with families as well as organisations, parishes, voluntary work and families themselves.

Municipalities as big employers are implementing a programme on municipal employment which aims at ensuring access to competent staff in child and family services.

## 6. Achievement of WFFC Plan of Action and related MDG targets

Targets under Child protection against abuse, exploitation and violence

Several criminal law reforms have been carried out in last years in order to provide more effective protection against abuse and exploitation especially to victims under age. The reforms of Penal Code (650/2004) concern e.g. *trafficking in human beings* and *aggravated trafficking in human beings* as well as *aggravated forms of pandering, possession and distribution of child pornography, buying sexual favours from a minor* and *arrangement of illegal immigration*. The reform entered into force on 1 August 2004 and it was partly due to the implementation of international obligations, inter alia Supplementary Protocol of the *Palermo Treaty*. All these offences include special provisions and penalty scales concerning cases with children as victims. The reform was completed this year when the *abuse of a person subject to sex trade* was made punishable (743/2006). By this law reform also the provision concerning buying sexual favours from a minor was amended. According to the new provision and the amendment, for instance, a person buying sexual favours from a minor shall be sentenced even if these services were paid by another person.

It can also be mentioned that new criminal provisions concerning *child abduction* (1161/2005) were adopted in 2005. The offender may now be sentenced to fine or imprisonment for at most two years. In connection with this reform a special provision of statutory limitations concerning, for instance, sexual abuse of a child was also amended.

One of the goals of the current Ministry of Social Affairs and Health Plan of Action on the prevention of intimate partner and domestic violence (2004–2007) is to intensify the help provided for children and adolescents experiencing violence. The status of children and adolescents living in violent families and their possibilities to get help are improved by intensifying the identification of violence and the early intervention in services aim at children and adolescents. Access to help for children who experience and who are exposed to violence is safeguarded through basic and specialised services. Different authorities and actors at the local level agree on action guidelines and procedures. Also the cooperation between basic services and child welfare is intensified.

On the basis of a decision by the ministerial group on internal security, a joint priority area for the administrative sectors has been established for the year 2007 that focuses on combating violence against children and adolescents. The aim to reduce violence against children and adolescents must be taken into account in the actions of all authorities in 2007. Considering the best interests of the child must be improved in all legislation, planning and decision-making. The abilities of those who work with children to identify violence against children must be improved and information on the consequences of violence, on how to intervene and on how to reduce violence must be increased. Also, collaboration between the authorities and organisations must be improved in order to guarantee care for children or adolescents who have experienced violence. Joint care chains for authorities and organisations must be developed and information generation and coordination must be improved.

The ministerial group on internal safety decided on 18 May 2006 to launch regular victim surveys on children and adolescents and to develop the registers of the police and health authorities so that they can be better utilised in gaining information on the victims and the prevalence of violence. The implementation of the decision is under preparation in the monitoring group on internal security.

In 2003 Stakes gave out a handbook for authorities concerning assessment of sexual abuse and assault of the child. The handbook has clarified the notification procedures and specified the division of responsibilities among the authorities. Already it has increased considerably the number of abuse notifications to the police.

In 2005 educational material on security skills for children was published. It is used to teach children in daycare, schools and school clubs how to prevent abuse. The aim of the material is to strengthen children's own skills to defend themselves and to keep track of their boundaries in difficult situations. The material includes hands-on tips for safety and visualisation exercises concerning for example bullying, assault or sexual harassment. Children are advised to turn to safe adults for help. The material also includes information and tools for multiprofessional cooperation and for cooperation with families. The method is already widely used.

Care possibilities for sexually abused children have increased. In 2004–2005, Stakes arranged two long training sessions for therapists and other personnel treating abused children. The diploma works were compiled into a book on the theoretical grounds and practical implementation of therapy forms aimed at victims of sexual abuse.

In Finland only a few new HIV-infections are reported annually. In 2005, the number was 130. Infections from mother to child are very rare, 0–1 cases per year (once in two or

three years). Children's infections are preventable thanks to the functioning Finnish system of prenatal clinics. A blood sample is taken at the prenatal clinic in case of HIV. If an expecting mother is diagnosed with HIV, she will receive prophylactic medication in order to prevent infection from mother to child.

The prenatal and child care clinics aim at preventing and identifying domestic violence. This means that each woman visiting the clinic is asked about intimate partner violence with the help of an established screening form. Victims are referred to further care. The aim is also the prevention of and early intervention in maltreatment of children. Parents are advised to pay attention to their own wellbeing. They are also advised that they should not give vent to their own illbeing against the child and that instead they should seek help. Child care clinics hand out leaflets titled "Never shake a baby" (Älä koskaan ravistele vauvaa).

## **7. Summary of lessons learned and initiatives undertaken since 2002 for accelerating the progress**

### Status of children

The average wellbeing of children and adolescents has remained high even during the recession in the 1990s and it has been further reinforced during the present Government's term of office. Also income development with regard to both income and subjective indicators has been average or above average for the majority of families with children. Lightening the tax burden has also improved the financial situation of families with children. In Finland, as in Europe as a whole, families with children are typically middle-income families. The share of families with children in the lower income classes has grown during the last decade, although it still remains below average. Increasing income problems of families seems to concentrate in single-parent households or families with small or several children.

Problems in wellbeing seem to accumulate on a relatively small number of children. The problems of these children manifest themselves in many different contexts and they require both efficiency and flexibility from the service system. Various kinds of threats to children's wellbeing have emerged in society that manifest themselves as uncontrollable life situations in families and as emergence of social exclusion chains. The key threats include subsistence difficulties due to long-term unemployment as well as substance abuse and mental health problems that often are associated with long-term unemployment. Children in such families are in a constant risk of social exclusion. Similarly the global media with no common rules as well as the uncontrollable market forces have created new kinds of threats to the wellbeing of children and adolescents.

The Finnish Government has reviewed the need for a broad-based follow-up of development of the wellbeing of children and families. For this purpose the post of Ombudsman for Children was established, the first Ombudsman taking office in September 2005. One of the key tasks of the Ombudsman are to assess how the rights of the child are realised in the Finnish society as well as to report on her observations both to political decision-makers and to children and families. A broad-based Advisory Board with representatives from different administrative sectors and stakeholders was established to support the Ombudsman's work.

## Labour market and reconciliation of work and family

As a whole, the employment trend has been positive after the recession in the 1990s. Although we have not yet reached the employment rate before the recession, the number of unemployed has significantly decreased during the present Government's term of office. By 2006 employment has increased with nearly 100,000 jobs during the present Government's term of office. Jobs have been created also for parents and the unemployment rate for two-parent households has been below the average.

Participation in work is one of the key factors in securing the subsistence of families with children. Surveys on the subsistence of families with children show that problems concentrate in those families where the parents have no possibility to work. The employment situation is especially difficult for single-parent households. Their employment rate has not been restored as it has been restored for other households. The situation is particularly problematic for female single parents. There is now widely accepted explanation for the decrease in single-parent employment. It is possible that the availability of jobs suitable for single parents' family situation has decrease due to the structural changes in recent years. For example, a majority of the jobs in the trade and service sectors that used to be based on monthly salary are now part-time jobs based on earnings per hour. Such jobs do not necessarily generate an adequate income but require very much flexibility from the employee with regards to working hours. Similarly, even a higher education does no longer guarantee a working career with steady income, and fixed-term employment has become more common in many jobs requiring higher education and especially in female-dominated sectors. However, explanations that emphasise single parents' voluntary withdrawal from the labour market highlight the incentive trap created by the income transfers to single parents which create a situation where it is not economical for single parents to work. In 2005, 15 per cent of female single parents were unemployed.

Fathers and mothers participate more often in working life than men and women on average. Mothers' employment is determined by the child's age: around one third of mothers with children under three years of age work outside the home while more than two thirds of mothers with children older than three years go to work. The child's age has no impact on the father's participation in work.

Working life is becoming increasingly demanding and competition between employees is also growing. Parents are often compelled to adapt to working life requirements. However, data on parents' subjective experiences show that parents would be willing to prioritise the family to other values if it had no effects on the income. Similarly, working life has a strong impact on the willingness to have children. Many young people postpone having children to an increasingly later date. People in childbearing age want first to find an occupation, to establish themselves at the labour market and to create other prerequisites for good living prior to having children.

Finnish parents have often full-time jobs and long working weeks. Their total weekly working hours are substantially higher than those of couples without children. Especially men tend to work long hours when they have small children. The Government has adopted a variety of measures to create parents with children in different ages a possibility for balanced parenthood and at the same time ensure parents an equal opportunity to participate in working life. The starting point has been to create various choices for the recon-

ciliation of work and child care that take into account different life situations. Alternative support and service systems have been created for families so that their individual needs could be taken into account in the best possible way.

## New initiatives

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has completed a review on necessary legislative reforms concerning the organisation of support and supervision during meetings between a child and his or her parent. The proposed revision of the Child Custody and Right of Access Act includes specific provisions on the prerequisites for arranging meetings between a child and his or her parent either with support or with supervision. The municipalities would answer for the provision of support and supervision. This would not apply to meetings between a child taken into care and his or her parents as these are regulated in the Child Welfare Act. The legislative initiative has not yet resulted in any legislative reforms.

According to the Child Custody and Right of Access Act, in a case relating to child custody or right of access the court must obtain a report from the social welfare board of the municipality where the child, the parents, the custodian or the proposed custodian has a place of residence. In the aforementioned review, a legislative reform was proposed with the aim of expediting the reports obtained from the social welfare board in cases relating to child custody or right of access. The initiative has not yet resulted in any legislative reforms.

In Finland there is only a little data available on the health of children under 12 years of age and on the services provided for them. A follow-up on the health of and health services for children and adolescents is under preparation. Also a national project will be launched with the aim of designing in multiprofessional cooperation a framework programme for the follow-up of the health and wellbeing of children under 18 years of age.

In 2006 the Government submitted to the Parliament a Bill concerning extensive reforms on local administration and public services. The objective of the Bill is to reinforce the municipal and service structures with consideration to local democracy, to develop the provision and organisation of services, to reform the municipal financing and state subsidy systems and to revise the division of tasks between the municipalities and the state. The aim is to improve productivity, curb the growth of municipalities' expenditure and create prerequisites for developing the steering of services organised by municipalities.

According to the Bill, the municipal structure is reinforced by uniting municipalities and by joining some parts of a municipality to another municipality. Service structures are reinforced by pooling services that require a larger population base than a single municipality and by increasing cooperation between municipalities. The goal is to ensure the citizens access to quality services across the country. The service structure must be comprehensive and economical and it must enable an efficient use of resources. According to the Bill, the municipalities can intensify their cooperation by establishing cooperation areas consisting of activity entities.

### Statistics on working children

	1995	2000	2005
The number of children aged 15 of which	66 900	67 600	70 600
In the labour force	9 200	11 700	9 500
Employed	5 800	7 400	6 200

	1995	2000	2005
The number of children aged 16 of which	67 300	70 300	67 400
In the labour force	13 400	18 700	14 500
Employed	9 000	12 000	9 400

**Source:** Labour Force Survey conducted by Statistics Finland

Year	Age	Total number	Employed	Unemployed
1995	15	66 900	5 800	3 400
	16	67 300	9 000	4 400
2000	15	67 600	7 400	4 300
	16	70 300	12 000	6 700
2005	15	70 600	6 200	3 300
	16	67 400	9 400	5 100

**Source:** Labour Force Survey conducted by Statistics Finland

Children under 15 are not included in the statistics.

### Act on Checking the Criminal Background of Persons Working with Children

At the beginning of 2003 the law entitled Act on Checking the Criminal Background of Persons Working with Children (504/2002), and joint with it Amendment of Act on Criminal Record (505/2002) came into force. This Act provides for a procedure by which the criminal background of persons selected to work with minors, i.e. children under 18 years of age, is checked for certain crimes. The purpose of the Act is to reduce the risk of children being sexually abused, subjected to violence or encouraged to use narcotics. The Act promotes children's right to a safe environment for growing up and learning.

The procedure for checking the criminal background applies to work which involves on a permanent basis and to a material degree educating, teaching, caring for or looking after minors, or other work in personal contact with minors, without the attendance of a guardian.

A study completed in 2004 on the application of the Act on Checking the Criminal Background shows that the attitudes of employers to this Act are rather positive. Approx. one half of those who replied estimated that the Act has worked well or at least reasonably well

in helping to prevent the access of unsuitable persons to work involving children. Only 10% of employers felt that the Act had no impact whatsoever.

In connection with this study, criminal register information was obtained on all those job-seekers who had crimes intended by the Act in their criminal register. This data covers the year 2003, during which year a total of 63,425 applications for an extract from the criminal register were received. The number of jobseekers who had a relevant entry in their criminal record totalled 79.

### **Family leaves**

The purpose of family leaves is to make it easier for the parents of small children to reconcile the needs of working life and family life. Family leaves enable the parents of small children to stay at home for a fixed term to mind their child and to grow as parents along with the child.

Provisions on family leave are contained in Chapter 4 of the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001). Since 2003 the eligibility for partial child-care leave has been extended so, that an employee may be on partial child-care leave until the end of July of the year in which his/her child ends the second year of basic education. The parents of a child eligible for extended compulsory school attendance are entitled to partial child-care leave until the end of the child's third year of basic education.

From the beginning of August 2006, the entitlement of an adopted parent to child-care leave was extended so that the child-care leave applies to the parent of a child below the school age until two years have elapsed from the adoption. Previously, the entitlement to child-care leave ended once the child turned three.

The entitlement of a parent not living in the same household with his or her child to temporary child-care leave was extended so that the parent not living in the same household is entitled to temporary child-care leave in case his or her child under the age of 10 falls ill unexpectedly. Previously, this entitlement only applied to the parent or guardian living in the same household with the child. This amendment facilitates the reconciliation of work and family in families affected by divorce and reinforces the emotional bond between the child and the parent not living in the same household.

The entitlement of parents with a handicapped child or one afflicted by a long-term illness to part-time child-care leave was extended so that this entitlement continues until the child in need of particular care turns 18. This reform helps the parents of a handicapped child or one affected by a long-term illness to reconcile work and family life.

### **Social guarantee for young people**

The Government's objective in reducing youth employment is that every young person finishing comprehensive school will be guaranteed a place in further studies and that young jobless people under 25 will be arranged a place in education, work practice or a workshop after 3 months of unemployment.

The implementation of the social guarantee for young people was launched in the beginning of the year 2005. The goal of the Social guarantee for young people scheme is e.g. to

promote access to education and the labour market for young people, to prevent prolonged unemployment among youths and to promptly intervene in order to prevent the development of exclusion among young people.

The social guarantee for young people applies to young people intended in the Act on Public Employment Services, or unemployed jobseekers aged 17-25. An individual job-seeking plan or activation plan must be drawn up for each and every unemployed job-seeker under the age of 25, before they have been unemployed for a continuous period of three months.

The social guarantee for young people also applies to immigrant youths within the scope of an integration plan so that they are offered services in compliance with the Integration Act. In case a young person past the comprehensive school age is lacking in knowledge and skills imparted in comprehensive school, he or she shall be supported and guided in obtaining these in co-operation with the municipal educational services.

In case the young person cannot take part in public employment services due to restrictions in his or her capacity to work or function, the Employment Office together with other actors, in particular the municipal social and health care services, will make an effort to ensure that the young person receives the type of services that will later improve his or her possibilities of taking part in labour force services.

The education authorities carry the main responsibility for such as speeding up the access to education and entry into the workforce of young people, implementing the so-called educational guarantee, as well as developing both student and study counselling. The labour authorities assume the main responsibility for implementing the social guarantee for young people.

### **Immigrant and refugee children**

According to information of Statistics Finland, there were 27,745 children aged 0-14 who spoke other than Finnish or Swedish as their native language living in Finland at the end of 2005. In those having entered the country as refugees, the share of children was the greatest. Quantitatively, the largest group of children speaking a foreign language were Russian speakers, or 6,095 children. 3,894 of the minors spoke Somali and 2,202 spoke Estonian as their native language. The share of immigrants having been granted a permit of residence based on humanitarian grounds was some 20%.

In 2005, a total of 3,574 asylum seekers entered Finland, of whom the share of children under 15 was 853 and that of young people under 18 was 1,120. In 2005, 220 underage asylum seekers had entered Finland alone, the largest number of whom was aged 15-17. The corresponding figure for the year before was 140. Their reception is arranged in community homes and supported housing facilities that operate in connection with the reception centres. By mid-November 2006, the number of underage asylum seekers who had entered the country alone was some 94.

The integration of immigrants and the general developing, planning, guiding and monitoring of the reception of asylum seekers and those granted subsidiary protection is the task of the Ministry of Labour. In connection with the Ministry of Labour, an Advisory Board for the Integration and Reception of Asylum Seekers works, which plans, develops and rec-

onciles the integration of immigrants and reception of asylum seekers as well as the reception of those granted subsidiary protection.

### **The Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers**

The Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (493/1999) entered into force in May 1999. This Act imposes on municipalities receiving immigrants an obligation to draw up an integration programme either independently or together with other municipalities. The Act also imposes the duty to draft an integration plan for individual immigrants. The authority assuming responsibility for this is the municipality. For those who are part of the labour force, this plan is prepared in co-operation with the Employment Office, and for those outside the labour force it is produced by the municipality. Pursuant to the Act, the integration plan focuses on the whole family.

The integration of children is mainly realised in day-care and comprehensive school. A plan must, however, be offered to an immigrant aged below 18, in case the immigrant him/herself or his/her parents request this, or the municipal authorities feel that he/she would profit from services and measures agreed in the integration plan. Consequently, an increasing number of individual integration plans are being prepared for children and young people in addition to the family-centred plans.

Employment Offices and municipalities can arrange as measures promoting and supporting integration e.g. measures and services required by the special needs of underage immigrants, in the arrangement of which the interest of the child will be taken into account.

The Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers was amended in 2005 to improve the legal status of children seeking asylum and to ensure that more attention is paid to their interests and special needs.

The Act now incorporates the requirement that accommodation must be organized so that family members can live together. This amendment simply formalized the existing practice.

Families with young children are whenever possible accommodated in centres where the environment is suitable for children. The starting point is that the asylum seekers are responsible for the well-being of their children. The Reception Centres provide recreational activities for children under school age while their parents take part in work and educational activities. The reception units (community homes) set up for the care and education of minors often are located in connection of reception centres for asylum seekers. The reception units and also the units intended for minors can be maintained by the state, municipality or an organisation. The institutions intended for minors are increasingly working as combined units; the same unit works both as a community home for asylum seeker children having arrived alone and as a family community home for children who have already received a permit of residence but who are without a guardian. This prevents the unnecessary moving of children from one institution to another.

School-age children are entitled to attend preschool and comprehensive school in the municipality. In the summer, children can take part in supervised summer camps. Various projects associated with studies and workshop activities have made it possible to improve the situation of young people past the comprehensive school age.

Special needs arising from the age, insecurity and physical and mental condition of asylum seekers must be taken into account in the organizing of accommodation and other aspects of reception. The Integration Act contains a special provision on the consideration of children's needs and on providing suitable advice to children requiring special support, rehabilitation and mental-health services.

Reception of underage asylum seekers arriving without a guardian takes place in family community homes. The care and livelihood of such children is mainly in accordance with the Child Welfare Act, while the staff at family community homes must meet the qualification requirements laid down in the Act on formal qualifications for social welfare personnel (272/2005).

A court shall assign a representative for a child without a guardian. In the period between the arrival in the country and the assignment of the representative, the child's right to be heard is exercised by the director of the reception centre in which the asylum-seeking child arriving without a guardian or the child receiving temporary protection is registered as a resident. This representative must when fulfilling his/her duties ensure the realisation of the child's interest taking into account the child's national, linguistic, religious and cultural background.

For a child who is not provided accommodation in a reception centre or a family community home, the reception centre must give the social welfare officials of the municipality in which the child resides details of the persons with whom she/he is staying. When the municipality has been notified of the child residing within its boundaries it is also in a position to supervise the child's interests.

If the child is without a guardian, the notification must include an assessment by the reception centre and the child's representative of whether the child can be taken care of and raised in a private household and whether the person assuming responsibility for the child is able to care for and raise the child. The reception centre must also provide the persons assuming responsibility for the child with guidance in the care and raising of the child in accordance with the applicable provisions of the Child Custody and Right of Access Act (361/1983).

In October 2006, the Government presented to the Parliament a bill concerning an amendment of the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception on Asylum Seekers. The proposed amendment concerns the implementation of an assistance system for victims of human trafficking, and it is intended that this Act would enter into force in the beginning of 2007.

According to this bill, the services and support measures provided for suspected victims of human trafficking will include: judicial and other advice, crisis support, social and health services, interpretation services, accommodation or housing, social support and other necessary care, and support of safe return. In the assistance, the special needs arising from the age, unsafe position and physical and psychological state of the human trafficking victim will be taken in consideration.

One of the leading principles of the assistance system would be specifically taking into account the interest of a child.

## **The protection of children belonging to minorities and asylum seekers against discrimination and xenophobia**

The Ministry of Labour has planned and co-ordinated projects in which the various authorities and organisations and bodies representing groups threatened by discrimination together develop capacities and tools for recognising, combating and preventing discrimination and racism.

Some of these projects targeted the prevention of discrimination against children and young people based on such as ethnic origin, disability and discrimination on multiple grounds. The projects have e.g. developed models for the training and continued training of teachers to build up their practical skills as regards intervening in situations of discrimination in schools and promoting the possibilities of equal learning and interaction. Models developed through various projects have been introduced in such as supporting Roma pupils and their parents.

In 2005, a portal of equality issues was opened at [www.equality.fi](http://www.equality.fi), and a handbook dealing with equality questions in the world of the school has also been published. The Ministry of Labour also co-ordinates two anti-discrimination networks.

Through EU programmes managed by the Ministry of Labour, such as the ERF, activities associated with the involvement and integration of refugee children and young people have been supported. The Ministry also was involved in the planning and implementation of a modelling project preventing the exclusion of immigrant young people, and improving the situation of young immigrants was taken into account as part of the Social guarantee for young people programme.

### *Immigration policy programme*

The Government approved the immigration policy programme on the 19 October 2006. The purpose of the immigration policy programme is to actively promote work-related immigration. Other key focuses of the programme include developing the immigrant integration system and improving ethnic relations. The aim is to promote the development of a pluralistic, multicultural and non-discriminatory society.

The matters covered by the programme include underage asylum seekers. According to the programme, children's needs should form the underlying principle in the asylum and refugee policy. Furthermore, when the interests of the child are assessed, it is essential to rely on the expertise of the child protection officials and to ensure unhindered exchange of information between different authorities.