Finnish children get to participate in the evaluation of their early childhood education and care

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Finnish children have a very positive attitude towards early childhood education and care (ECEC), according to new research from the University of Eastern Finland. Published in *Early Child Development and*

Care this August, the study explored children's negative experiences of early childhood education and care. The researchers have published an article on children's positive experiences already earlier.

"Studying children's experiences of, and their participation in, early childhood education and care is very topical in Finland right now, since the country's new ECEC legislation from 2018 places increasing emphasis on children's interests and participation," Postdoctoral Researcher Kaisa Pihlainen from the University of Eastern Finland says.

Furthermore, the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that the child shall be given the opportunity to be heard matters affecting him or her, and the importance of taking the child's opinions into consideration in the related decision-making is also emphasized.

The study involved 2,500 children aged between 2 and 6 years. Most of the negative experiences of ECEC reported by children were related to their interaction with peers, i.e. they reported getting pushed around or hit, or being yelled at or called names.

Other themes children highlighted as negative were associated with play, discomfort, rules and restrictions, guided activities, ECEC professionals and their activities, and environmental factors. Children's gender and age had a statistically significant effect on negative experiences connected with interaction and guided activities. Having to take a nap in the middle of the day in particular was highlighted as a negative thing, because it was seen to take time away from playing. Many of the negative experiences reported by children were also linked to play, since play is a key activity in ECEC. Children felt that their peers disturbed their play, or that they were left out completely.

"We know that being excluded is one of the most stressful events in childhood, and some children may experience rejection more strongly

than others," Postdoctoral Researcher Pihlainen points out.

The newly published study focused on children's negative experiences of ECEC, and the researchers have published a study on children's positive experiences already earlier. According to Postdoctoral Researcher Pihlainen, children's positive experiences of ECEC were associated with their own and guided activities, such as play and excursions. Children in family day care settings also highlighted more positive things than others relating to human relationships and everyday situations. The youngest children in day care centers were able to name more persons by their names than others, and six-year-old children mentioned special days and trips as the most important source of positive experiences.

The objective of quality evaluation in ECEC is to identify strengths and targets for development. Children's experiences haven't been taken into consideration in quality evaluation on a large scale before and, according to Postdoctoral Researcher Pihlainen, the new findings now provide an opportunity to support children's resilience and sense of belonging, both of which are important elements in ECEC quality.

"Our findings suggest that quality evaluation performed by children is a promising method that can supplement multi-methodological quality evaluation in ECEC. The findings can be used to improve ECEC practices by paying specific attention to children's participation and to the things they experience as positive or negative."

The study is based on data collected by means of children's interviews conducted by their parents. Parents used a rigorous interview protocol with open-ended and closed questions. The researchers point out that the involvement of parents in data collection strengthens collaboration and builds trust between families and ECEC. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that parents' participation in collecting children's views involves some challenges.

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More information: Kaisa Pihlainen et al, Children's negative experiences as a part of quality evaluation in early childhood education and care, *Early Child Development and Care* (2020). DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2020.1801667

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