



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

**Children up to the age three:  
focus on five national curricula on ECEC**

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### Introduction

#### Context:

Cross-European research project *"Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European Early Childhood Education and Care"* funded by EU/FP7-SSH-2013-2, grant agreement 613318 (CARE: Curriculum analysis and impact review 2013a, b)

- Analysis of national ECEC curricula in 11 European countries (Sylva et al. 2015) including an additional analysis of these documents in five countries (**Denmark, England, Finland, Norway and Estonia**) regarding the younger children

#### Research question:

*What do these five national ECEC curricula tell us about ECEC for the children up to the age three?*

#### Data:

- National curriculum frameworks and guidelines (Denmark: the Day-Care Facilities Act)
- Data: 160 pages → text referring to *age* [children up to age three] about 10 pages

#### Note: In all countries but England:

National curriculum frameworks and guidelines → Local (municipal) and/or unit-specific educational plans (→ *Individual ECEC plans for every child in Finland*)

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### Age coverage in the national steering documents

**In all five countries:** ECEC as a unitary system, covers all children up to school age: The national steering documents concern all children throughout the entire ECEC phase, thus also children up to age three.

### References to the age in the steering documents

1. Age indicated generally
2. Developing, gradually growing child
3. "Young/younger" child
4. References to precise age given in years

*(Presentation of findings mainly based on examples of direct citations from the documents)*

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### 1. Age indicated in general

Some references to age in general occur **in every steering document**, connected (although not in every country) to

- purpose of the steering document
- purpose of ECEC
- tasks and functions of ECEC settings
- aims and values of ECEC
- safety and physical environment
- learning/content areas
- activities and participation of the children
- concepts of ECEC and learning
- role of educators

**Finnish** and **Norwegian** documents have many references to age in general, whereas such references are rare in **Denmark, England and Estonia**.

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### *Purpose of the Day-Care Facilities Act (in Denmark)*

**Denmark:** [the purpose] is “to create coherence and continuity between facilities [i.e. ECEC/day-care settings] and make transitions between facilities coherent and **age-appropriately** challenging for the children.”

### *Purpose of ECEC (in Norway)*

**Norway:** “Kindergartens shall provide pre-school children with an environment that offers both challenges appropriate to **the age** and level of function of the children, and protection from physical and psychological harm.”

### *Tasks and functions of ECEC settings (in Estonia, Norway)*

**Estonia:** “Taking into account **the age**, sex and individual needs and characteristics of each child, the main function of a preschool institution is to:

- 1) create possibilities and conditions for the formation of a healthy personality who is socially and mentally alert, self-confident and considerate of others and who values the environment
- 2) maintain and strengthen the health of the child and to promote his or her emotional, moral, social, mental and physical development.”

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### *Aims and values of ECEC (in Norway)*

**Norway:** “Ethical guidance and instruction provided by the kindergartens must take the **children’s age groups** and the various cultural, religious and belief-related backgrounds of their homes into account.”

### *Activities and participation of children (in Finland, Norway)*

#### *Play and exploration*

**Finland:** “Very young children play in interaction with adults or older children. At **an early age**, children also start to actively explore their object environment, which prepares them to a transition to imaginary play (...)

#### *Participation and collaboration*

**Norway:** “The degree of participation and how the right to participation is put into practice will depend on **the age** and level of function of the child.”

### *Safety and physical environment (in Denmark, England, Finland, Norway)*

**Denmark:** “The child environment shall be assessed from a child’s perspective and the children’s experience of the child environment shall be included according to **the children’s age** and maturity.”

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### Role of educators (in Estonia, Finland, Norway)

#### Finland:

"**At an early age**, children need an educator who is regularly nearby and knows their individual way of communicating. The educator reacts empathetically when the child initiates contact, thus encouraging the child to interact." (...) "The educator community needs to have didactic knowledge about children of **different ages** and different developmental stages."

### Concepts of ECEC and learning (in Finland, Norway)

#### Finland:

ECEC "is a whole comprising the intertwining dimensions of care, education and teaching. These dimensions receive a different emphasis according to **the age of the child** and the situation."

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### 2. Developing, gradually growing child (in England, Estonia, Finland, Norway)

**England:** "Practitioners must respond to each child's emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction. **As children grow older, and as their development allows**, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.

**Estonia:** "**While the child grows and develops** the content of teaching shall, as a rule, be based on the principle - from closer to further, from single to general."

**Finland:** Through the ECEC content orientations, (i.e. mathematical, natural scientific, historical-societal, aesthetic, ethical and religious-philosophical orientations), the children "**start to acquire** tools and capabilities by means of which they **are able to gradually increase** their ability to examine, understand and experience a wide range of phenomena in the world around them."

**Norway:** "Through learning processes, children become familiar with and **increasingly understand** the physical and social world around them, at the same time as recreating and changing the cultures to which they belong."

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### 3. References to young /younger children (in England, Finland, Norway)

#### Language and communication (in England, Finland, Norway)

**Norway:** “*The youngest children* express their views through body positions, mimicry and other forms of emotional expression” (...) “Interaction through body language and play involving sounds is important to the way in which *young children* approach other people.”

#### Play (in Finland, Norway)

**Norway:** “The games that small children play are closely related to their particular sense of humour. For *the youngest children*, humour is primarily based on the body, and is developed through interaction between children. ...”

#### Physical development and health (in England, Norway)

**England:** “Paediatric first aid training must be relevant for workers caring for *young children* and where relevant, *babies*.”

#### Role of educators (in Finland)

**Finland:** “(...) *the younger the child* is, the more he [sic!] needs to be cared for by adults.”

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### 4. References to precise ages in years (in Denmark, England, Finland)

#### Health and safety regulations (in England)

##### England:

##### Indoor space requirements:

- *children under-two-year-olds* 3.5 m<sup>2</sup> per child, *two year-olds* 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> per child
- there should be a *separate baby room* for *children under the age of two*. However, providers must ensure that *children in a baby room* have contact with older children and are moved into the older age group when appropriate.”

##### Catering and hygiene:

“There must be suitable facilities for the hygienic preparation of food for children, if necessary including suitable sterilisation equipment for *babies’* food.” ...

“Providers must ensure there are suitable hygienic changing facilities for changing any *children who are in nappies (...)*”

#### Age-related unit-specific curricula (in Denmark)

##### Denmark:

“All day-care facilities shall prepare a written pedagogical curriculum for *children aged 0-2 years* and children aged 3 to school age.”

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### Language, language assessment and stimulation (in Denmark, England, Finland)

#### Denmark:

“The local council is responsible for ensuring that a language assessment is performed for **children aged around 3 years** who are admitted to a day-care facility, if any linguistic, behavioral or other issues indicate that the child may need language stimulation.”

#### England:

“When a child is **aged between two and three**, practitioners must review their progress, and provide parents and/or carers with a short written summary of their child’s development in the prime areas” (... )“Practitioners must discuss with parents and/or carers how the summary of development can be used to support learning at home...”

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### Concluding remarks

#### Picture of the younger children in the documents

- Children whose very young age should be taken into account in every respect in ECEC, together with their developmental stage, individual needs, interests, abilities, gender and family background.
- Their health and safety must be ensured indoors and outdoors, in care situations and various activities. *(In all countries, especially in England)*
- They are seen as social actors from the very beginning *(especially Finland, Norway)*
- They communicate holistically, by their body positions, facial expressions, gestures and movements
- They learn in close interaction and relationship with their educators
- They are eager to explore their surroundings
- They express themselves in play and learn context-specifically through daily routines.

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### *Role of educators*

*In addition to their role in promoting children's language development:*

- educators must have knowledge and understanding of children's development in order to enhance children's learning and by so doing contribute to their wellbeing
- their role changes along with the child's growth and development. The younger the children are, the more caring interactions they need
- when children develop and grow, they gradually begin to need the educator less and orient more and more towards joint activities with their peers. Thus, along with age, their physical and social worlds expand with the help of experienced and competent educators.

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### *Younger children vs. older children in the documents*

- children under age three are rarely addressed specifically
- almost all regulations and recommendations cover the ages from birth to school age
  - what issues pertaining to younger children in ECEC should be considered central in the curricula, and even elaborated on?

### *Important themes poorly explicated in the documents [→children up to age three]*

- the very beginning of the child's attendance in ECEC
- transitions within the same setting and transitions from one setting to another
- role of parents in ECEC

### *How to interpret and use the national curricula for pedagogical work with the younger children?*

- need for a stronger focus on younger children in the ECEC curricula
- need for elementary research-based guidance in the national document
- Need for utilizing growing knowledge gained through multi-disciplinary childhood studies , and, e.g., through neuroscience

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### Finally: limitations of this review

Limitations, e.g.

- a restricted, possibly even unfair picture, of the state of affairs in the five countries (cf. additional manuals and booklets, set of acts and decrees)
- subjective interpretations of the documents (e.g. what does “young child” mean?)

→ This review can only act as supplement to earlier research on ECEC curricula in different countries, and as a pilot for more comprehensive curriculum analyses in future.

**Thank you!**

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National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions Regulation of the Government of the Republic No. 87 of 29 May 2008. **(Estonia)**

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