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National [Education](#)

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Looking to Swedish model of childcare and education

To Australians, the Swedish system of Educare which provides a nationwide network of subsidised preschools for children aged one and above is mind blowing and enviable.

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What is Educare?

In Sweden, childcare and education combine in an integrated system known as Educare. Often cited internationally as the gold standard in early learning, Educare is a nationwide network of subsidised preschools that provide childcare and education for the children of all working parents from the age of one.

More than a childminding service, Educare teachers and support staff are well educated and actively encourage children's learning and development through a targeted national curriculum, implemented in 1998.

While preschools in Sweden typically operate between 6.30am and 6.30pm daily, many now have extended hours to accommodate shift workers, including nights and weekends.

Fees are proportional to parental income and capped at a monthly maximum equivalent to less than \$AU200. Children from the age of three receive 525 hours a year free of charge. The system is complemented by paid parental

leave arrangements that provide 480 days for each child, insured at 80 per cent of parental income.

Why are preschools set up this way in Sweden?

The Educare system is the result of a decades-long struggle in which gender equality was a driving feature. From this struggle arose a mission to design a childcare system that would be accessible, affordable, provide a stimulating environment for children and where women and families would feel comfortable leaving their children. As more women transitioned into the workforce, the campaign grew to include the rights of all children to quality education and care, not just the children of working women.

Underpinning Educare is the belief that all parents should be offered the same childcare opportunities, regardless of family income. Implicit, also, is the understanding that society reaps rewards when both parents work, including productivity gains and the retention of talent in the workplace.

Where is it happening?

Aside from Sweden, other Nordic and European countries are admired for the nationally subsidised universal childcare they provide. Figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) show that the five developed countries boasting the highest percentage of working mothers - Iceland, Slovenia, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden - all provide nationally subsidised, integrated childcare programs.

In the United States and Britain, childcare is not formally assimilated with education, nor is it subsidised or regulated in the same way. Consequently, availability, quality and cost vary enormously. Expense is a factor that prevents many women from returning to work. For example, OECD figures show that childcare costs can represent as much as 30 per cent of income in some countries, compared to Sweden's 4 per cent.



To care and to educate: the Swedish system of Educare provides nationwide facilities for children aged one and above.

RICHARD ORANGE

Canada shares these concerns, and childcare in the province of Quebec is government subsidised, with minimal cost for parents.

What about Australia?

Australia's childcare arrangements are not formally integrated with education and while a large childcare industry exists, both cost and limited availability are inhibiting factors for parents; particularly in inner urban areas where waiting lists can be long.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that grandparents provide childcare to almost one-third of children with working parents.

Nevertheless, the government does provide some financial assistance for childcare through benefits and a rebate scheme and the Paid Parental Leave (PPL) initiative, implemented by the former Labor government, allows 18 weeks paid at the minimum weekly wage.

The federal government's recent budget announcement has reignited debate about childcare and PPL entitlements. While streamlining the benefits scheme was broadly welcomed, the plan to remove paid parental leave (PPL) entitlements for parents in receipt of employer-paid contributions (amid controversial accusations of "double-dipping") was not.

What do proponents say?

In Sweden, many regard Educare as an essential feature of the welfare system. It is credited with advancing the female and maternal employment rates to among the highest in the European Union and with alleviating child poverty.

Advocates say that in offering affordable, holistic childcare education, well-educated staff, thoughtfully designed and well-resourced centres, and in valuing children highly as individuals, Educare has created many benefits for children, families and society at large, including: improved school success, better work-life balance, greater economic independence for women, more stable long-term employment, reduced poverty, less substance abuse, and reduced crime rates.

Some say the laws surrounding Educare policy have, over time, shaped people's attitudes for the better. For example, employers largely view pregnancy and paid-parental leave positively, and neither men nor women are sidelined in

their careers as a result of taking time off. Furthermore, the expansion of the workforce has not only fattened government revenue coffers, but also provides a boost to national productivity.

What is the downside?

While integrating childcare with education is considered a highly positive idea, the key question for policy makers regarding the implementation of such schemes is whether or not having more parents join the labour force can offset the cost of subsidising the system.

While some say it can, many acknowledge that it would take many years for financial rewards to flow, thereby making it a difficult proposition for mainstream political parties to advocate; given the three-year election cycle.

Others say universal care puts a subtle pressure on people to conform to the system: the pressure to prioritise paid work and childcare over caring for children at home. They argue that home care is also a way of contributing to society and that a one-size-fits-all approach does not always benefit children or their parents.

Overall, many argue that universal, integrated childcare and education plays an important role in terms of social cohesion and national advancement. It has positive flow-on effects in the areas of health, productivity, tax revenue and in addressing the gender pay gap, thus providing compelling reasons to emulate the Swedish model.

Links

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[OECD Family Database](#)