

Cooperation with imprisoned parents in early childhood education and care in Finland*

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ABSTRACT: Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a public service for all children and families living in Finland. To advance the child's growth, development and learning, cooperation with parents is an essential part of ECEC. According to the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care*, one of the underlying values in ECEC is the diversity of families. However, according to various studies, the curricula for ECEC reproduce a family-centered discourse based on a hegemonic and ideal nuclear family. Although there are a lot of children in Finland who are affected by their parent's imprisonment, very few studies on how parental incarceration is dealt with in ECEC exist. It is common that ECEC staff do not know that a parent is in prison, which makes providing support to the family almost impossible; hence more openness is needed. Additionally, at an institutional level, ECEC should be much more inclusive and focus on diversity, equality, and equity. Culturally relevant pedagogy considers the diverse sociocultural worlds the children live in – including parental incarceration. Educators should reflect on their own personal views about parents who have committed crimes and remember that children are always innocent. Lastly, more societal discussion on prejudices and discrimination against parents who are or have been in prison is needed.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, diverse families, equity, cooperation with parents, parent's imprisonment*

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Introduction

Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a public service for all children and families living in Finland. The best interest of the child is always the primary principle in ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018). Furthermore, one of the objectives for ECEC in Finland is “to promote equality and equity and to prevent social exclusion” (Uusimäki et al., 2019, p. 83). High-quality ECEC is especially beneficial for children from less privileged backgrounds (Närvi et al., 2020). A critical factor that influences a child’s educational outcomes and well-being is parental involvement and a supportive role in their child’s ECEC (Uusimäki et al., 2019). However, cooperation with parents of at-risk families can be demanding for ECEC staff and it requires knowledge, time, sensitivity, and excellent collaboration skills (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016; Niemelä, 2015). The lack of relevant research can make cooperation even more demanding. In this introductory article, we concentrate on cooperation with parents who are in prison, mainly from the ECEC personnel’s point of view. People who are convicted of crimes, especially if they are multiple recidivists, often have difficulties in many areas of their lives and need a lot of support in their role as a parent. Many other vulnerable groups of people exist but, in this article, we concentrate on inmates because of the comorbidity of challenges.

Although there are a lot of children in Finland who are affected by their parent’s imprisonment, very few studies, or even academic discussions, on how parental incarceration is dealt with in ECEC exist. In the best interests of the children, we want to start the discussion. In this article, we ask:

- How many children face parental imprisonment in Finland?
- How does the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* guide ECEC personnel to cooperate with at-risk families?
- How can ECEC personnel support families with parents in prison, both pedagogically and socially?

We aim to encourage ECEC teachers and other staff to discuss, both collegially and with parents, the effects of parental incarceration that children experience. Parental incarceration should not be a taboo in ECEC but a normal issue that can be addressed with children, too.

Imprisoned parents and their children in Finland

No recent studies have touched on the number of children Finnish inmates have. According to Ryyänänen and Suomela (2011), there were 9409 prisoners in 2009, with 62% of prisoners having children and the average number being 2.17 per inmate. These figures also include the children of spouses' previous relationships living in the same household. As a result, approximately 12500 children were estimated to be affected by parental incarceration each year (Ryyänänen & Suomela, 2011).

The number of inmates has decreased in the last decade in Finland. In 2020, 5278 persons were imprisoned altogether, and the daily number of inmates was 2800 (Criminal sanctions agency, 2020). If we assume that about two thirds of inmates have two children, the number of children affected by imprisonment nowadays would be around 7000 yearly. It is also worth noting that the number of incarcerated changes by the year, which increases the number of children who have experienced parental imprisonment during their lifespan compared with yearly numbers.

The number of prison inmates in Finland is one of the lowest in Europe, but those who end up in prison usually have serious challenges in their everyday lives. Prisoners who have been caught in the cycle of criminality pose a challenge both for the criminal sanctions system and for society in general (Hypén, 2004). On the other hand, we must remember that prison inmates and their families are a diverse group. For example, for one child, a parent's imprisonment can be a tragedy but for another, it can be a great relief (Enroos, 2021).

Cooperation with diverse families in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care

There are two documents that guide the Finnish ECEC sector: the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* (EDUFI, 2018,¹ revised in 2022) and the *National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education* (EDUFI, 2014). In this article, we focus on the former, which guides education for children under the age of six. The National Core Curriculum is based on the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018).

¹ *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* was revised in 2022. However, because of a lack of official English translation, the 2018 edition is referred to in this article. The accounts of cooperation with parents are much the same in the documents.

Cooperation with the parents is at the center of the National Core Curriculum for ECEC and is one of the objectives of ECEC in the Act on ECEC, too. One of the underlying values of the Finnish ECEC – among the rights of the child, equity, equality, diversity etc. – is the diversity of families:

An open and respectful attitude towards diverse families and their varying languages, cultures, worldviews and religions, traditions and views on education creates preconditions for good educational cooperation. Children’s family identities and familial relationships are supported so that each child can perceive their own family as valuable (EDUFI, 2018, p. 21).

Chapter 3.3, “Cooperation in early childhood education and care”, includes a section on cooperation with guardians. According to the document, “*the cooperation aims to promote joint commitment of guardians and personnel to children’s healthy and safe growth, development and learning*” (EDUFI, 2018, p. 35). This educational cooperation requires mutual respect and trust (EDUFI, 2018). It is the responsibility of the ECEC personnel “*to act with initiative and actively*” (EDUFI, 2018, p. 35), considering the individual needs of children and the diversity of families (EDUFI, 2018).

In addition, chapter 5, “Support for the child’s development and learning”, says that cooperation with a guardian is even more important when a child needs support (EDUFI, 2018). Interestingly, it is emphasized later in the chapter that “*the child shall be provided with the necessary support for development and learning determined by the child’s best interest even if the guardian is not committed to the collaboration*” (EDUFI, 2018, p. 59). In general, the document represents parental involvement in ECEC in a positive, and even ideal, way. This is the only sentence in the whole document that admits that collaboration may not always be that easy. In addition, the concept of “guardian” used in the documents is problematic. Not all parents are guardians; for example, a mother may be an important person in a child’s life but may not necessarily be a legal guardian. The curriculum text then excludes such a figure because it refers to a child’s parent as a guardian. They can also be excluded in practice in ECEC, especially when official documents like a child’s individual ECEC plan are being prepared and are required to be signed by their guardian(s).

Eskelinen and Itäkare (2020) analyzed the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care* and local ECEC curricula from a gender-sensitive perspective. According to their research, the curricula for ECEC reproduces a family-centered discourse based on a hegemonic and ideal heteronormative nuclear family when emphasizing the meaning of educational collaboration with parents in ECEC. Although the diversity of families is one of the underlying values mentioned in the Core Curriculum, it is not that visible in the guiding documents (Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020). Some of the local curricula do mention culturally and/or linguistically diverse families, and one of them

Itäkare & Suomela.

Journal of Early Childhood Education Research 12(2) 2023, 147–157. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

mentions vulnerable families but does not explain what kind of family is vulnerable. Still, for example, families with one or two members in prison are not mentioned in the documents (cf. Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020). Furthermore, according to Eerola et al. (2021), the division between “ordinary”, ideal Finnish families with heterosexual parents and “diverse” families (e.g., LGBTIQ+, immigrant) is strong in ECEC administrators’ discourses. Regarding “diverse” families as *other* – including families with imprisoned parents – in the institutional settings deconstructs the ideas of equality and equity and builds hierarchies between different family types (Eerola et al., 2021). Such wording can also have a strong impact on ECEC praxis.

Tension between the curriculum and praxis

In 2020, only about 70% of children in Finland took part in ECEC, mainly in municipal ECEC centers (The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). One of the main reasons for this is the Finnish support system for young families – a home care allowance. This encourages parents to take care of their children at home because the allowance is not available if a child attends an ECEC center. The cause of concern is about 90% of recipients of the allowance are mothers with low levels of education and several children, and their children are at risk of being marginalized from ECEC (Närvi et al., 2020; Uusimäki et al., 2019). It can be assumed that many prisoners’ children belong to this group because such families often have several socioeconomical challenges (cf. Enroos, 2021).

There are no statistics about prisoners’ children's care forms in Finland (e.g., at home/in ECEC) and statistical systems and legislation do not allow such statistics to be collected. The Finnish Foundation for Supporting Ex-offenders has been collaborating with prisoners’ families since 2006. According to the supervisor responsible for family work, all the children of client families are within ECEC (Alanen, 2021a). However, this client group is eager to get help, which is not necessarily the case with all the families dealing with imprisonment.

As stated previously, the ECEC curricula strongly emphasize the importance of active cooperation between ECEC personnel and parents. Still, from the parents’ point of view, collaboration with ECEC requires resources like time, availability, digital skills, a mobile phone, knowledge of educational jargon, knowledge of the Finnish educational system, commitment to middle class values and lifestyle (like getting up early in the morning, commitment to mutual agreements), among others. Although qualified interpreters are commonly in cooperation with parents in Finnish ECEC (EDUFI, 2018), knowledge of

Finnish (or Swedish) language is a great benefit for parents. To summarize, not all parents have the resources needed to cooperate with ECEC educators.

At the same time, ECEC staff regards cooperation with parents as positive but sometimes challenging. For example, it can be challenging if the teacher and parents disagree on the child's need for support (Alasuutari, 2010; Hujala et al., 2009) or if there are cultural differences (Tobin et al., 2013). In one study, ECEC educators "*stated that difficulties in parental involvement are often caused by poor parental motivation and a lack of time on the part of both educators and parents*" (Uusimäki et al., 2019, p., 82). It is also a question of power: Finnish ECEC "*educators want to restrict education to institutions and regard parents as passive*" (Uusimäki et al., 2019, p. 87; see also Repo et al., 2019; Venninen & Purola, 2013). In the context of the National Core Curriculum for ECEC, which emphasizes parental involvement, this attitude is highly problematic. One of the tasks of the Finnish ECEC is to support families with young children. Support is, however, impossible if parents are not regarded as equal and active cooperative partners in ECEC.

Getting support is also hard if the parent is absent – for example, in jail. According to Santanen (2013), parents experienced difficulty in getting support with being a parent during a prison sentence. In Santanen's data, there were 32 prisoners with children under the age of six. Sixty-two percent of the prisoners had told their children where they are and why. The rest of the prisoners tried to keep the reason for their absence a secret, telling the children a different story (Santanen, 2013).

Furthermore, only nine percent of the prison inmates in Santanen's study reported that ECEC staff knew that a parent was in prison (Santanen, 2013; see also Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). The percentage is low, and the need to hide parental imprisonment makes parental involvement in ECEC difficult. It is also almost impossible for ECEC staff to support children and their family if they are ignorant of circumstances at home. In Santanen's thesis, adult children of prison inmates mentioned loneliness in their childhood. They felt like outsiders in their own life, and they would have needed much more support than they received (Santanen, 2013; see also Roberts & Loucks, 2015).

Supporting the child and the family

ECEC is still a middle-class institution which tends to marginalize other families – for example families living in poverty or with a member in prison. Usually nobody asks them what kind of services they need and would like to have. "*Absence of parental voices is especially salient in the case of families that are the object of concern for policymakers and scholars*" (Vandenbroeck & Van Laere, 2020, p. 92).

Itäkare & Suomela.

Journal of Early Childhood Education Research 12(2) 2023, 147–157. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

Because of the social stigma of prison sentences, it is understandable that parents don't want to talk about it with ECEC staff, not to mention to other families in ECEC. Still, for the sake of children's well-being and growth, more openness is needed and the culture of silence must be broken. However, openness is only possible if ECEC staff regard all parents – also those imprisoned – as equal and succeed in building an atmosphere of trust and respect. To do that, educators should reflect on their own personal views about parents who have committed crimes and remember that children are always innocent (Clopton & East, 2008). The ECEC manager's duty is to support their work community in this process. Of course, we also need more societal discussion on prejudices and discrimination against people who are or have been in prison. Future-oriented ECEC is an excellent place to start the change in attitudes (EDUFI, 2018)

In some cases, an educator may know about parental incarceration, but the parent prohibits discussing the imprisonment with their child. If this is the case, the educator should discuss the matter with the parent in a respectful and supportive manner and emphasize that openness and honesty are usually in the best interests of the child. The educator should not act as an expert in these discussions. Instead, the idea is to find solutions together and respect the parent's expertise in knowing their child (cf. Venninen & Puroola, 2013). Sometimes it is the child who is reluctant to discuss their parent's imprisonment, although the parent hopes that the topic is covered in ECEC. In a situation like that, the educator should be sensitive and proceed at the child's own pace. The educator can ideally be a stable attachment figure who helps the child cope with their parent's absence (Trout, 2018).

In addition, parental incarceration should be discussed in the classroom before any children experience it in their own lives. Culturally relevant pedagogy considers the diverse sociocultural worlds the children live in – including parental incarceration (Brown & Mowry, 2016). Information on the topic may normalize it and even prevent bullying. It is also important for the teacher to emphasize that making a bad choice leading to a prison sentence does not make anyone – for example, a mother or a father – a bad person (Brown & Mowry, 2016). Children's books about imprisoned parents can be helpful in approaching the topic (Brown & Mowry, 2016) but unfortunately, there are very few available in Finnish. For example, the picture book *Miirun isä on vankilassa* ["Miiru's Father Is in Prison"] (Alanen 2021b) could easily be in every ECEC center.

Both parents and children usually need a lot of support when one or more family members face a prison sentence. It is a lengthy process, starting before imprisonment and continuing after (Santanen, 2013). ECEC staff should support an imprisoned parent's parenthood in every viable way. For example, if the parents are divorced and not in contact with each other, the teacher could send information about the child's learning to

the imprisoned parent. The teacher could also offer them the possibility to participate in meetings (for example, preparing the child's individual ECEC plan) remotely by video call. Instead of a problem-based perspective, the teacher should focus on the imprisoned parent's strengths and capacities as a parent. In addition, multi-professional cooperation between ECEC, social work, health care, criminal sanctions etc. should be sufficient, flexible, and continuous. The occupational structure of ECEC centers was reorganized in 2018, and there is a new job title, Bachelor of Social Services, in ECEC (EDUFI, 2018). With this change, professional competence to support prisoners and their children in ECEC will hopefully improve in the future.

At an institutional level, for example in guiding documents, ECEC should be much more inclusive and focus on diversity (Eskelinen & Itäkare, 2020). In addition, Finnish ECEC should participate actively in deconstructing the stigma of parents' criminal backgrounds or other socially stigmatizing elements. It requires continuous training of the ECEC staff. At the time of writing, ECEC teacher education programs at Finnish universities do not adequately cover collaboration skills in meeting families with a member, for example, in prison or a recovering addict. For this, ECEC teacher training curricula at universities should be revised as soon as possible. In addition, we need much more research within the specific field of ECEC on parental involvement and incarceration. The voices of children, parents, and educators – in other words, collaboration triad – must all be heard (Uusimäki et al., 2019).

When collaborating with parents in challenging life situations, the most important focus is the well-being of the children. The collaboration triad dismantles the stigma and shame connected with criminal sanctions, encourages the parents to speak with their children and educators openly, and thus increases the children's trust in their parents and the adult world in general.

With this article, we want to increase awareness and discussion on the diverse backgrounds of children in ECEC, some of which may be challenging for the child and their development. ECEC educators should be more aware of different kinds of families and pass this understanding on to children with suitable pedagogical methods. Children who have a parent or another important person in prison is one example of a group of people whose situation may be difficult to talk about due to, for example, shame and prejudices. The child may also need help understanding that what an adult or adults have done is never the child's fault. Cooperation between ECEC and parents in diverse life situations should also be more strongly encouraged in the guiding documents than the current curricula.

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Itäkare & Suomela.

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