

The transition to child care

By the time this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is published, UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) will be about to publish its *Report Card 8: The Transition to Child Care*. The Report Card proposes ten benchmarks for measuring the quality of early childhood care and education, and applies them to the 25 high-income countries in the OECD.

Eva Jespersen is the Chief of Monitoring of Social and Economic Policies at unicef's Innocenti Research Centre (IRC) in Florence. She spoke to *Early Childhood Matters* (ECM) about the background to the Report Card and what the IRC hopes its publication will achieve.

ECM: This is the eighth report card issued by the Innocenti Research Centre. The seventh, which dealt with children's wellbeing, provoked an unprecedented level of media attention. How did you decide on early childhood services as the topic for the follow-up?

Eva Jespersen: That decision really grew out of doing the research for Report Card 7, as it became clear to us that it was practically impossible to get information on early childhood that would allow comparisons between OECD countries beyond health indicators. As a consequence Report Card 7 gave more attention to primary school aged children and upwards, but we knew it was a shortcoming not to be able to include more indicators specific to younger children.

We wanted to use the opportunity of Report Card 8 to propose an initial set of indicators or basic standards/benchmarks that would allow for easier comparisons between countries and stimulate further refinements. A guiding principle of the Report Card series is that if you're going to seek effective change in some area, first of all you need to be able to measure it in a transparent and accountable way.

We were also very aware that early childhood has become a hot issue in many OECD countries in the last few years, with an increasing number

of governments increasing their expenditures on young children. Our intention is that by making international comparisons possible, even if only in the form of a snapshot, this Report Card will both fuel and focus debates going on within particular nations and give taxpayers greater ability to judge whether they're getting value for money.

Few of our readers will be surprised by the report's essential conclusion, that there is a compelling case for investing much more in early childhood. It's a recurring complaint in the early childhood community that, though well-established, this message isn't more acted upon.

Indeed, there is a huge literature on early childhood showing what a great impact well-designed programmes can have, and how many potential benefits there are for higher levels of investment. The problem is that this discussion has largely been going on very much within the early childhood community, and tending to concentrate too much on the minutiae of nuances and refinements.

What's needed is to distill the essentials of the case in a way that takes it beyond the realm of specialists and captures the imagination of both policymakers and the general public. We need to make voters more aware of early childhood, and thereby ensure that politicians feel more compelled to address it. That is where we believe UNICEF can have an impact, as a strongly invested partner in early childhood but also with the ability to take a step back and present a broader view.

So what is it about the approach taken by the Report Card that will help investment in quality early childhood programmes to make that breakthrough into public awareness?

Largely it's the simple fact of having the audacity to seek to compare. When we started this process, there wasn't a lot of systematised information out there. When we looked at the four dimensions of quality, access, political will and the various conditioning

factors that enable investments in early childhood services to meet their potential, we found that it was frustratingly difficult to make comparisons.

With this Report Card we are suggesting that these are areas in which comparisons can usefully be made, and this is not an uncontroversial idea. There will be those who argue – and John Bennett discusses this question in a background paper that will come out with the report – that there are so many cultural particularities involved, which may challenge a comparison systems of different countries.

But we would point out that the caveats of cultural sensitivities don't stop us from valuing comparisons in other fields, such as healthcare. So we think it's worthwhile to come up with benchmarks that will allow international comparisons on quality of early childhood services.

The Report Card sets out 10 benchmarks, ranging across issues like parental leave, access, child poverty and staff training. How did you come up with these benchmarks?

John Bennett was our lead expert and researcher on this. We started off by holding two consultations at the IRC involving early childhood experts including from a number of governments we were going to rank, to discuss what might be the indicators that could be assessed. And these produced an initial list of 15 questions that were formulated in a way that would lend themselves to comparisons by requiring a concrete answer.

After a lot of debate and back-and-forth, we took the decision to winnow down these questions into the ten benchmarks you see in the report. Not everyone was happy with this. There will be some early childhood experts who will complain that we have missed important nuances.

But we realised that there is a trade off to be made here. We wanted to avoid getting so bogged down in nuances that we'd be unable to make our case clearly and comprehensibly. There will always be a balance to be struck between covering an area in perfect detail and being able to distill it in a way that's suitable for reaching an outside audience.

There are obviously some countries that will come out of this benchmarking exercise looking better than others. Were all the countries in agreement with the indicators used, and to what extent are you interested in joining the dots between the countries that show up well on these indicators and the kinds of policies that they have in common?

We're very careful not to get involved in discussing what are the best policies. We just want to say here are some indicators of what you can try to achieve, and let each nation take it from there in terms of debating what their vision should be for early childhood and how best to achieve it.

One thing that all these 25 countries have in common is that all of them are sufficiently affluent to achieve ambitious national plans for early childhood, if the political will is there. And you can see from some Central European countries in particular just how much can be achieved in this area with sufficient political will even when financial resources are more limited.

Of course, it's impossible for everyone to be above average, and the choice of benchmarks is our own. But this is not about finger-pointing and creating anxiety, it's about stimulating debate – and this comparative data also helps us to recognise that there are a lot of positive experiences in a lot of different countries. In all 25 countries, the early childhood specialists have been very supportive of this initiative and we're grateful to all of the governments for being responsive to our questions.

The amount of debate stimulated by Report Card 7 sets the bar pretty high for Report Card 8. Once the paper is published, how will you go about the task of getting it talked about?

One of UNICEF's great strengths is that in each of the OECD countries assessed in this Report Card we have a national committee, and they will take the lead in organising events with the media and getting national experts lined up to contribute to the public discussion. The headline-grabbers will differ between nations – in one country the issue that most needs highlighting might be parental leave, say, while in others it might be about access to early childhood care.



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At UNICEF IRC we will support the committees in any way we can by providing spokespeople and media resources. But we’re fortunate that this is already a hot topic in many countries, and consequently it’s a debate that many national committees are eager to get involved in.

And if it were up to you to write the headlines, what’s the one take-home message that you’d like to see emphasised in the public debate that you hope this Report Card will spark?

One thing we’re very keen to get picked up is the importance of meeting the needs of vulnerable children in an inclusive way, because the danger of targeting programmes at poor children is that the level of service often ends up being comparably poor. Especially for children who come from immigrant families and where there are issues with language, it’s not only a question of school readiness but of social inclusion and that is much better tackled through quality provision for all.

The Report Card 8, in brief

The following is a condensation of the forthcoming Innocenti Report Card 8, The Childcare Transition, prepared by Early Childhood Matters. It inevitably cannot do justice to nuances contained in the full report, and should not be taken as indicating what the Innocenti Research Centre would wish to emphasise.

The great change

The Report Card starts by calling attention to the “great change” now occurring in the way in which children are being brought up in the world’s economically advanced countries: “Today’s rising generation in the countries of the OECD is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of their early childhoods not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of childcare.”

The neuroscience revolution

While this “Childcare Transition” gathers pace, a “parallel revolution” is underway in neuroscientific research, increasing our understanding of the importance of early childhood. Important concepts to emerge from this research include:

- the sequence of ‘sensitive periods’ in brain development;

- the importance of ‘serve and return’ relationships with carers;
- the role of love as a foundation for intellectual as well as emotional development;
- the fostering of the child’s growing sense of agency;
- the ways in which the architecture of the developing brain can be disrupted by stress;
- the critical importance of early interactions with family members and carers in the development of stress management systems.

Neuroscience “is beginning to confirm and explain the inner workings of what social science and common experience have long maintained – that loving, stable, secure, stimulating and rewarding relationships with family and caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for almost all aspects of a child’s development”.

The potential for good

The childcare transition brings an enormous potential for good. Children can benefit from interaction with other children and with childcare professionals; their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development can be enhanced. Childcare can help immigrant children with integration and language skills, and can erode one of the last great obstacles to equality of opportunity for women.

Most importantly, early childhood education and care offers “a rare opportunity to mitigate the effects of poverty and disadvantage on the futures of many millions of children” by extending the benefits of good quality child early education and care to all children.

The potential for harm

But the potential for harm in the childcare transition is equally evident. For babies and infants, a lack of close interaction and care with parents can result in sub-optimal cognitive and linguistic development, and long-term effects which may include depression, withdrawal, inability to concentrate and other forms of mental ill-health.

“Concern has also been expressed about whether childcare may weaken the attachment between parent and child, and whether it may not be putting at risk the child’s developing sense of security and trust in others. Doubts have also been raised

about possible long term effects on psychological and social development, and about whether the rise of childcare may be associated with a rise in behavioural problems in school-age children”. The most important generalisation to be made is that “the younger the child and the longer the hours-per-week spent in childcare the greater the risk”.

The need for monitoring

Most OECD governments have formulated policies and invested in early childhood education and care. The approaches, however, vary from country to country: “In some, early childhood services are almost as well-established and well-funded as primary schools. In others, they are often muddled in purpose, uneven in access, patchy in quality, and lacking systematic monitoring of access, quality, child-to-staff ratios, or staff training and qualification”.

OECD governments have the “clear responsibility” to monitor the childcare transition. “In fields such as health care, employment law, and the education of older children, common standards have demonstrated a potential to stimulate and support sustained progress”.

Four dimensions and 10 benchmarks

The Report Card proposes 10 benchmarks as “an initial step towards an OECD-wide monitoring of what is happening to children in the childcare transition” and applies them to 24 OECD countries plus Slovenia. There is an “inevitable crudeness” about these benchmarks as they can only use the limited data that is available, and the Report Card is careful to express caveats about their limitations. They were drawn up in consultation with academic experts and government officials from different countries, and each represents “a pairing of an indicator with a suggested value”.

The 10 benchmarks can be used to monitor progress across four dimensions which are critical in enabling the delivery of effective early childhood services: the policy framework, access quality, and a supporting context of wider social and economic factors.

Going forward

The Report Card calls for “essential data on early childhood services to be included in standardised data sets. Without definitions there can be no

measurement; without measurement there can be no data; without data there can be no monitoring; and without monitoring there can be neither evidence-based policy, effective advocacy, or public accountability”.

It does not propose outcome indicators, but expresses the hope of working towards “a widely agreed means of measuring the extent of the disparities between children’s abilities at the point of entry into the formal education system. It would then be possible, in principle, to measure the overall efficacy of early childhood services by the extent to which they succeed in reducing such disparities”.

Political feasibility

Is doubling the amount spent on early childhood services a politically feasible goal? Encouraging factors include the large and growing public demand for high quality services, and “widespread recognition that many of the social, educational and behavioural problems that affect the quality of life in the economically developed nations have their origins in poor parenting and disadvantaged backgrounds”.

With increasing knowledge about early childhood, “there is today no convincing reason for spending less on early childhood education and care than on schools and teachers for older children”.

A high-stakes gamble

In conclusion, the Report Card describes the childcare transition across the industrialised world as “a revolution in how the majority of young children are being brought up. And to the extent that this change is unplanned and unmonitored, it could also be described as a high-stakes gamble with today’s children and tomorrow’s world”.

It points out the “clear danger that the potential benefits of early childhood education will be reserved for children from better-off and better-educated families while the potential for harm will be visited mainly on children from disadvantaged homes”. The childcare transition could become “a new and potent source of inequality. If this is allowed to happen, an historic opportunity will be lost”.