



American Enterprise Institute

Web event — The unintended consequences of universal childcare: Lessons from Sweden

Welcome and introduction:

**Katharine B. Stevens**, Visiting Scholar, AEI

Presentations:

**Caroline Höglund**, President, European Federation of Parents and Caregivers at Home; President, National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents

**Ulla Waldenström**, Senior Professor, Karolinska Institute

**Madeleine Wallin**, General Secretary, European Federation of Parents and Caregivers at Home; International Coordinator, National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents

Discussion:

**Caroline Höglund**, President, European Federation of Parents and Caregivers at Home; President, National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents

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Moderator:

**Katharine B. Stevens**, Visiting Scholar, AEI

Tuesday, March 2, 2021  
10:00–11:30 a.m.

Event page: <https://www.aei.org/events/the-unintended-consequences-of-universal-childcare-lessons-from-sweden/>

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Good morning, everyone. I'm Katharine Stevens. I'm a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute specializing in early childhood development and learning. And I'm delighted to welcome you to today's discussion of universal childcare.

Over the past few years, focus on early childhood has increased a great deal as both the public and policymakers have gained a much better understanding that children's earliest years are so critical to their long-term health and well-being. Along with this, there's now growing momentum around moving towards a universal early care and education system, sometimes described as public education starting at birth. As many of you know, I've long been a strong advocate for ensuring that lower-income working families have access to high-quality early learning programs for their children. And it's very encouraging to see such an increased focus on the importance of early childhood.

At the same time, as energy around building a universal system has been ramping up, I've become increasingly worried about two things. First, I'm worried about what the aggregate effects of a much greater emphasis on out-of-home early care and education programs could turn out to be for young children's development and well-being. Second, I'm also worried about what I see as a lack of sufficiently thoughtful, nuanced discussion of the pros and cons of universal system and the need for a more open debate about how best to ensure all children flourish, which I know is our shared goal.

So I'm delighted to have three early care and education experts from Sweden with us today. As many viewers know, Sweden is widely admired as a global leader in high-quality universal early care and education. Our presenters today are going to share their research and expertise on problematic aspects of even such a well-respected and high-quality system, which I'm hoping will help inform our thinking here in the US.

Our three participants are, first, Ulla Waldenström, who's a senior professor at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden. In 2014, Ulla published a book analyzing the effects of preschool on children's development and has been an active participant in the public debate of preschool highlighting, in particular, a lack of research on preschools' long-term effects on children. Ulla also has professional expertise as a school psychologist and midwife and has conducted a substantial body of research on reproductive health. She runs a blog called Thinking Evidence, which presents research evidence for the public, including on reproductive health and the effects of preschool exposure on children.

Second, Caroline Höglund is the president of the European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home, known as FEFAF. She's also the president of the National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents, known as HARO, which is a Swedish-based organization that aims to promote parental choice and early care and to advance parents' rights to live with, care for, and nurture their own children at home, whether full- or part-time. Her work with these organizations is dedicated to serving as a voice for children, aiming to educate and empower parents and put children's well-being at the center of the political agenda.

And finally, we're joined by Madeleine Wallin, who is general secretary of FEFAF, as well as the international coordinator and a board member for HARO, and formerly served as president for both organizations. Madeleine has also played an active ongoing role in the UN's Economic and Social Council's Commission for Social Development and Commission on the Status of Women. Her work focuses on advocating for freedom of choice equality and for parents in Swedish family politics and for the value of unpaid caregiving work.

Each of the three participants will present for around 15 to 20 minutes. We'll then have a discussion, which we hope will be prompted by your questions. There are two ways to ask questions. You can email them to [martha.baker@aei.org](mailto:martha.baker@aei.org) or send them via Twitter using #SwedishChildCare. Please feel free to send question as they come to mind. We'll collect them as we go along to answer after the presentations. With that, I'm delighted to turn things over to Ulla.

**Ulla Waldenström:** Thank you. And hello, everybody. And thank you so much for inviting me to this seminar. I'm going to talk about briefly the Swedish system. And I've used here in the introduction slide the term "early childhood education and care" in Sweden. That's what's used by OECD. But you can also say universal childcare. And I will be using the word "preschool" because that's what it is all about in Sweden. Please, next. Next slide, please.

Here is an illustration of the development in Sweden from 1975 to 2019. I would also like to say that during the first years here, my own children went to preschool. And then I've another experience many years later with the five grandchildren who all have gone through preschool. So that was my personal interest in this topic.

You can see from the red line that's the development. That's the number of children who are attending preschool in Sweden. And the dip in the middle of the curve there is related to the fact that the system changed in Sweden, so the 6-year-olds went into compulsory school. So nowadays in preschool, the children are 1–5 years old. And another interesting line here is the bottom one in black, which shows the decline in family daycare. And these are the two options that are publicly funded and basically the only options given to parents. So you can see that preschool, which is center-based care is the primary and almost the only option. Next, please.

Early childhood education and care is an option for parents. So it's, of course, a voluntary alternative. And it means that all parents who have a child from 1 year of age to 5 have the right to place in the preschool. And the fee is very low. It's based on income, number of children, and number of hours per day that the child stays in the center. And the fee is around \$180 a month. And that represents about 8 percent of the total costs for one child. Yeah, these are the Stockholm figures. Please, next.

I would like to say a few things about parental leave and women's park in the labor market as a background. We have in Sweden a very generous system of parental leave with 480 days that the woman has the right to stay home with the child with a payment similar to that for sick leave. And that's not the full salary but a relatively high percentage of the salary. And in addition to these 480 days, the parents can stay home 90 days on a flat rate with very low pay. And of the 480 days, 210 can be shared between the two parents. And of the 90 days, all the 90 days can be shared 50/50.

And today the figures are 30 percent. Of all the total number of days taken as parental leave, 70 percent is used by the woman, and 30 percent is used by the father. And that has been a relatively slow development towards increasing involvement by fathers. But the latest figures are from 2020, and they were 30 percent. Okay, next slide, please.

This figure, I've taken it from OECD, just to illustrate the difference between Sweden and the US. The bar to — it's all women actually from 15 to 64 years who have at least one child in the age, up to 14 years. And it includes both full-time and part-time. And it's the red arrow that is of interest because you see, to the left, far left, you have Sweden with 83 percent of the women who are employed either full-time or part-time. And in the US, it's 65 percent. And these figures are from 2014, or the latest available for OECD.

And the next slide shows the employment rate in women and men with small children. And this represents the last 15 years from 2005. And you can see that women with small children, 80 percent are working and 90 percent of the men. Please, next.

The number of preschools in Sweden, these are the latest statistics, around 10,000, and 71 percent are public and 29 percent private. But by private, it doesn't mean that the parents pay the fee because it's funded by taxes, but it's run privately. So for parents, it's the same, it doesn't make much difference if it's a public or a private preschool. Please, next.

And these bars illustrate the percentage of children in the respective age group who attend preschool. And if you look at age 1, you see that half of the 1-year-olds go to preschool. And the average age when children start preschool is around one year and a half, 18 months. And that's a reflection of the parental leave. But then when they get older, it increases to 95 percent. So you can say that the absolute majority of children below 6 attend preschool in Sweden. Next, please.

When it comes to quality of care, these four aspects are often highlighted as important. One is staff competence, child/staff ratio, number of children per group, and indoor and outdoor environment. And I will talk about the first three, starting with staff competence. Next slide, please.

This is educational background of preschool staff in Sweden, 2019. And you see that 40 percent are preschool teachers. And today that's a three-year university degree. And child carer, that's diploma program, or it's actually a program in high school as well. Twenty percent have that kind of education. And 40 percent have not any of the required education.

And this is one of the current problems and probably reflecting also the increase of preschools. Because when my children went to preschool in the beginning of the '70s, the proportion of preschool teachers was higher. And the aim is that each preschool should at least have one preschool teacher, and the proportion of staff without any required education was much smaller than today. Please, next slide.

And now I'll talk about number of children per group. Because that's more discussed than child staff ratio in Sweden. And there are national guidelines about the number of children per group. And with group that's — when we talk about group, that's one department of children usually. There are recommendations, and they are given as a range, so there is no specific figure. But as you see, it differs between the youngest, the recommended number of children per group is 6–12 and in the oldest 9–15. Next slide, please.

I've also tried to look at opinions about parents who are criticizing the system or trying to improve it even further. And one such organization is what we in Swedish call Barnverket. It's an NGO focusing on children's well-being in preschool, elementary school, high school, by increasing parents' involvement and influence with these institutions. And they define a

specific number. They recommend, for instance, 10 children in the youngest and 15 in the 4- to 5-year-old group. But the ranges are quite similar to the national recommendations.

But if we look at the next slide, I've compared the information I've just talked about. So these three columns, if you look at the last one, that's the NGO organization, and in the middle, you have the national guidelines. And the first one, which is in yellow, that's statistics from the latest statistics and presented as range. And if you compare these, you can see that the mean number of children per group among the youngest was 12.2, which exceeds slightly the maximum number in the national guidelines.

And definitely higher than wished or requested by Barnverket. And similarly, among the oldest, the average was 15.5 children per group. And that also exceeds the maximum recommended and also by Barnverket. So the groups have become larger over time. And it's discussed quite intensely among preschool teachers, especially regarding the youngest children. And I'll come back to that. The next, please.

When it comes to child/staff ratio, I can say that in contrast to groups' size, child/staff ratio is not specified in the national guidelines for preschools. However, annual statistics are available, as I will show you on the next slide.

So 2019, the average number of children in the whole preschool population, one to five years per full-time employee in Sweden, was 5.2, including all caregivers. And that's an important aspect to keep in mind. Who do you include when you talk about staff? And if you look at the preschool teachers, they were 13 children per preschool teacher. And next, please.

Barnverket specified the ratio issue like this: They recommend three full-time positions per group for child-related activities, plus one half-time permanently employed replacement in case of sick leave or absence for other reasons. And these figures do not include staff doing administration, cleaning, cooking, etc. So I think when you discuss the ratio, you really need to specify what kind of staff. Is it really those who are hands-on with the children all the time, or do you also include those doing the administration, for instance? Please, next.

And if I compare here in a similar way as with group size, I only have — it's only possible to compare the entire group, 1- to 5-year-olds. And you see that in Sweden 2019, there was 5.2 children per one staff, and the request by Barnverket, 3.5 to 1. Okay, please next.

So, overall, compared with many other countries, most preschools in Sweden are of high quality. But variation in quality has increased over time. And depending on when you compare, if you compare in the beginning and when my children were in preschool, and now the number of children per group has increased, and child/staff ratio has also changed.

So my last slide, please. I tried to list the challenges that I see. There is a shortage of qualified staff and high rates of sick leave. Preschool teachers, that is the group with the highest sick leave of all professional groups in Sweden. And that illustrates also that there is a lot of stress in the system. The other challenge is the limited freedom of choice because family childcare has decreased and there are no other options that are funded. And I know Madeleine will come back on that. And the third one is the major concern when you discuss quality. It's the youngest children where the group size, for instance, I forgot to say that. Barnverket, when they give their recommendations, they also always add that if there are

children with special needs, the groups need to be much smaller than the ones recommended, which I showed you.

The balance between caring and teaching is also being discussed. And this concerns the smaller children, because when this change was — when you saw the dip in the curve that I showed you, there was an organization, a structural change in Sweden, so the preschools went into the school system with their own curriculum and with measurable outcomes and so forth. And there is a concern among especially those caring for the smallest that teaching has been emphasized too much in relation to caring.

And then we have a high percentage of children who are of non-Swedish-speaking background, as in so many other countries. And according to the rules for preschools, they also have the right to get support in their native language, which is really a goal that is difficult to reach.

And the last point here is the one that I have been involved in, that there is a lot of research that has been done, especially in many other countries, in the US and the UK and also in the Scandinavian countries. But there is still — and there is evidence suggesting that — quite good evidence that there are some relatively short-term positive effects that you can measure, for instance, in school start and maybe one more year on children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes. But studies on long-term effects are very inconclusive.

So you cannot say if preschool prepares for the beginning of school, but you don't know so much about long-term effects. And since that is my focus, I've conducted a lot of studies, experimental studies, randomized trials, and so forth, evaluating effects of different interventions. And I think it's a very, very hot and important topic that when you expose all the population in the most vulnerable period of human life, you should also have a very intense research agenda to measure and follow-up to do longitudinal studies. And you need many of those from many countries before you can really summarize the results in systematic reviews.

So I have been a little bit upset by the lack of I think the insufficient studies. And that's why I participated also in the debate because there is lack of knowledge about the lack of knowledge, if you understand what I mean. Okay, I have one more slide. Thank you for listening.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Ulla, thank you very much. That was a really tremendous presentation. I have a number of questions. I'm sure our audience does, too. So I'm looking forward to following up with some more discussion. And now I will turn the screen over to Caroline.

**Caroline Höglund:** Thank you so much. Okay, so thank you for the invitation to be part of this webinar. I'm happy to be here today. So yes, my name is Caroline Höglund, and I'm from Stockholm, Sweden, where I live with my husband and our three children. I'm the president of two organizations, as Katharine mentioned, both of which are working for parents and children. First HARO, the Swedish National Association of Stay-at-Home Parents, and second European Federation of FEFAF, which Madeleine will tell you more about later after this.



HARO has been working for 40 years now to promote freedom of choice for parents regarding childcare and to be a voice for parents who wish to care for their children at home in the early years. So today, I would like to bring out three unforeseen consequences that affect both parents and children and the Swedish society as a whole. And my deepest desire is that you will leave here today with new awareness and insights of unintended consequences that we can see now in Sweden after decades of almost free and available childcare for all. And hopefully, this will be beneficial in your own current changes and development of childcare.

So the first issue that I want to bring up is that childcare started as a widening of choices, and now it is the only socially acceptable choice. So the developmental childcare was a way for mothers and fathers to be able to work outside of the home to raise GDP. In Sweden, also a political measure to ensure that everybody would be free and independent. This was necessary for gender equality and a widening of choices for women to be able to participate in the workforce. And it created options for parents to form their lives as they wanted, whether it be working at home caring for a small child for a couple of years or working outside of the home earlier.

But what we can see now in Sweden is, however, that our choices have been limited again. It might seem surprising, but given that nearly all children in Sweden are enrolled in preschool, starting at about 12 to 18 months, the norm to do exactly that has become very strong. Staying at home with your child longer than the norm of about a year is not only difficult financially but socially as well. It is not socially accepted, and parents are often questioned and hear that they don't contribute to society. And it can also be a really lonely and rather overwhelming task for parents to take on. So it leaves little choice.

It is hard to portray how the situation is because it's not illegal to stay home with your kids in the early years, yet anyways. It is important to mention that several proposals have come up recently of mandatory childcare. But the norm is so strong that most parents don't even feel that they have a choice. They never even think of it as a choice at all. We have left our children in the care of others for so many years now, so the norm is laid out and adhere to like the only option.

One example of this comes from one of our members in HARO, who wrote an article in our latest magazine issue. And she told the story of how she and her husband, they had always chosen to go their own way in life; they didn't care about what other people thought or about following norms. But despite that, they never even thought about making a different choice when it came to childcare for their children. And I think that portrays the situation a little bit.

Another telling example is a video that the Swedish government made in 2018 to inform immigrants of Swedish norms and values. A former politician said in this video, "In Sweden, both mothers and fathers work, and children go to childcare." And these are the messages we're now so used to hearing.

Previously, we have had a type of home care allowance, which allowed for parents of children aged 1–3, so after parental leave, to stay home with their children during that period and still keep their jobs and get a small sum of money for not using childcare. However, it was removed because it was not considered gender equal, because mostly women chose to use this allowance. One politician said about this, quote, "To accept an allowance for caring

for children at home would be to recognize that the home is an alternative. And that would give the rest of us feelings of guilt,” end of quote.

So the allowance was finally removed in 2016. And instead, the widespread preschool culture and how heavily subsidized it is sends a clear message. So childcare choices being erased is a potential unforeseen consequence that we in Sweden live with today when childcare is expanded and pushed for as the only socially acceptable option.

So what can we do about this? I wish we could have a palette of different options. I wish we could provide options without alienating another. And I urge you to be more intentionally inclusive of different choices of childcare, to respect different families’ situation choices of life, and above all, different needs in children.

The second issue that I would like to bring up is that a political shift of the purpose of childcare has affected parental confidence and trust. So in 1998, Sweden changed the name from childcare to preschool, even for babies. And this has affected the view of institutionalized care in many ways.

Preschool now has a curriculum, as Ulla already told you, even for toddlers, and has gone more and more from caring to learning. When really providing love, interaction, some call it serve and return, and nurturing care through safe attachment should be the main focus for these children in the early years, according to science. So somehow, we seem to have lost track of what our youngest children need most and how they learn.

Instead, parents in Sweden who choose to stay home a little longer with their small children hear that their children will miss out on education, fall behind and miss out on social training. As if learning, socialization, and stimuli is not possible to achieve with the parent. And because of this, many parents are now afraid that their children will fall behind if not put in preschool.

I spoke to a politician about the possibility of enabling for parents to choose to care for their children at home in the early years if they chose to. And she responded that we can’t control what parents do with their children if they are cared for at home, so it is better for children to be in a controlled institution. So slowly, but surely, we are eroding the confidence and trust in parents. And the bottom line is that most parents do their utmost and are most definitely capable with innate abilities to care for their children.

The belief that parents can no longer raise their kids sufficiently without preschool might seem foreign to you. But it is an unforeseen consequence that we see clearly in Sweden, after decades of rebranding childcare to preschool and pushing for the view that that is the only place where they can learn.

My wish is that we can value and empower parents. They have an incredibly important role in our societies and need our support and trust. And my wish is also that we can make the knowledge and science of what children need in the early years to flourish and grow and mature optimally generally recognized and accessible to all so that we can know that this can be achieved with a parent at home and hopefully even in childcare as well.

So the third issue that I would like to bring up today and last issue is that with a strong push to ensure that all children are in preschool, the quality of care fails. In Sweden, 85 percent of



all children between 1 to 5 are now enrolled in preschool. Of all the 2- to 5-year-olds, the number is as high as 93 percent. In itself, perhaps this is not necessarily a bad thing. But when you start to look at the quality of care these children are getting, that's when it becomes alarming.

So I have seen many preschools from the inside, working at about 20 different ones around Stockholm as a substitute teacher. And I have also been a parent to a child attending preschool. And I would like to share one of my experiences with you.

A couple of years ago, my youngest daughter got into a sought-after preschool. She was 3 years old at the time. As we were trying it out, I was there possibly four times maximum. When I left her in the morning, there was always some children that cried when we walked in, cried for their mommies, hoping it was them that came to pick them up at 9:00 a.m. in the morning. Every time I was there, children circled around me. They looked for my eye contact. They took my hand. They just wanted my contact and closeness.

One afternoon when I came to pick up my daughter, I saw a small girl in the hallway crying. And since there was no — she must have been like, about a year old, not more. Since there was no preschool teacher around, I kneel down from a distance and just met her eyes, and immediately she came over and put her little head on my shoulder. And it touched me to the core. I was a complete stranger to her and actually all of the other children as well that seek my contact and closeness. As you can imagine, we made other arrangements for our daughter.

But I feel deeply concerned with environment in preschools today. And I'm not the only one. Thousands of Swedish preschool teachers are reporting alarming deficiencies in an uprising all over the country that started in 2013. So the ratio of children to adults is skewed. The groups of children are often too large, exceeding recommendations. And sick leave rates are among the highest, as Ulla also mentioned, which means that parents on occasion are forced to leave their child to a stranger.

The economy is obviously a driving factor, and more children and bigger groups provide more money to the business. And ultimately, it's our kids that has to pay the price for this, but also the preschool teachers who say that they have worked into the ground. One preschool teacher engaged in the uprising said, quote, "Swedish preschool is a sinking ship. We are on our knees, and the children are not doing well." It raises a lot of defensiveness to even talk about childcare or preschool, but I hope we can do it because that's the only way to make it better.

In Denmark, they have actually dared to question and look at and examine their institutions a little bit more, with hidden cameras, researchers that observe documentaries on childcare, and parent protests. And the observations were worrying. One of the things they did was to put up cameras in a preschool to look at how much interaction there was between a child and an adult on a random day.

A 3-year-old girl was there for five and a half hours, and she got 17 minutes of interaction with an adult. Twelve out of those minutes were from reading a book. A boy who was there for seven hours and eight minutes, he got six minutes. Just imagine for yourself for a moment having, say, five 2-year-olds in a bigger group that you care for amidst changing diapers, helping someone to the toilet, cleaning up accidents, eating and washing, keeping them safe,

and following the curriculum of teaching. Still, having time to look every child in the eye, interact with them in a responsive way, talking to them, explaining their emotions, and comforting them.

I feel for all the carers and preschool teachers who really struggle with this, and I certainly would, too. And yet this is what our children need. So the unforeseen consequence is that when the conditions are such as in preschools in Sweden today, it is difficult for the caregivers to provide the care that they still want to and in turn for children to attach and get the care that they need, and the quality of care fails.

So to be able to provide good quality childcare for our children, we need to look at what children need, not at what we as adults want childcare to be. So we know today that children need secure attachments, responsive and nurturing relationships with a lot of interaction, and language-rich experiences. And this is, for example, to talk to your child about what's going on around you while having eye contact, what you're doing, and interact with them like that in a responsive way. And this is important. We also know that small children are very sensitive to stress and also separation from their primary caregivers.

So these are a few of the things that we need to remember when building, budgeting, and executing childcare. We need caregivers that are able to build an attachment with the child and who have enough time to see, interact, and talk with each child. And for this to be possible, strict restrictions of group size and ratio of children to adults is needed and cannot be compromised.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could build a childcare for those who need it and maybe want it in this way, focusing on what children really need? So I urge you to learn from Sweden's mistakes and shortcomings and to instead provide a palette of different options where freedom of choice is preserved since every child, parent, family, and life is different. And I urge you to empower parents. I urge you to look at what children need and budget, build, and then execute childcare based upon that.

So, too, many social reforms in history have negative consequences that could have been foreseen had we done our homework. So let's learn from each other and create the best odds for children in getting the great care that they need and that we collectively strive to those societies where that can occur. So thank you.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Caroline, thank you so much for such a thoughtful presentation. I'm looking forward to continuing the discussion. And now we'll turn it over to Madeleine.

**Madeleine Wallin:** My name is Madeleine Wallin, and I'm the secretary general of FEFAF, European Federation of Parents and Carers at Home. I'm also the international coordinator and board member of HARO, where I work with issues concerning families, children's needs, parenthood, motherhood, gender equality, and unpaid caregiving work. Here I represent FEFAF, an umbrella organization with 19 member organizations, which is accredited at the ECOSOC at the UN.

We want leaders and policymakers to probably recognize that unpaid care should be equally valued, protected, and recognized on a human, social, and economic level. That the care that children receive, especially during the first years of life, impacts the whole of adulthood and must be prioritized.

I became a mother in 1989 and have now five children between 18 and 32. And together with many other Swedish parents, mainly women, I experienced difficulty in caring for my own children after the days of parental leave were finished. I struggled to work part-time leaving my three little boys to daycare, and I got sick from stress.

When I expected my fourth child, my only daughter, I suddenly realized how the state and the existing norms had made me go against my own wishes and what actually would work best for us. So I quit my job. I stayed at home despite that no one stood on my side, not even my husband at the time. "We can't afford it. People don't do that." That's what he said. But he changed his mind, and we managed but without support from the state. And I spent some years working more intensely than ever before after in my life. But in the statistics, I was invisible. My work didn't count, and I felt excluded.

This was a life-changing experience that made me dedicate my work for being an advocate for children and mothers. It happened 21 years ago, and I'm still fighting for the rights for parents to care for their children for as long as necessary. It's remarkable that we as a society accept a situation where care is not counted in the economy unless you pay someone else to do it. If another mother cares for my child, it counts in the economy. If I do it myself in the statistics in Europe, I'm an inactive person.

In 1934, the famous Swedish couple Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, they argued for the value of sharing responsibility for child-rearing between parents and society with trained teachers. And Alva, she created and developed the first daycare centers in Sweden with progressive ideas on how to support mothers and improve the lives of children built on modern psychology. Ninety years later, their vision has become reality. And Sweden has undergone a shift in responsibility for children, going from parents and the family to the state. And now we see the individual as strong, and the family as weak.

Stefan Fölster, who is a well-known Swedish national economist and actually the grandson of Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, he said that it's more socially economically profitable for the state to compensate parents with two or more children to care for their children themselves and to pay for preschool or childcare. So the state provides a huge subsidy for childcare in Sweden. Parents only pay 8 percent of the total of \$18,500 annual per child. And in 2019, Sweden paid \$10 billion for childcare. And there are now proposals to make preschools compulsory. But there is no support at all for parents who want to care for their children themselves.

So under Swedish and international law, the main responsibility for children belongs to the parents. But here we see parents who have become persuaded that experts and trained teachers will care for their child better than they do themselves. And other consequences we see is that there is a distrust in parents. The school, the health care system, and the police have the obligation to report any case of concern to social security, which is good. But there were 1,000 reports of concern made daily in 2018. And that number has since increased, especially during the pandemic.

Homeschooling has been forbidden since 2011. And if you don't take your children to school, you have to pay your fine and can even lose custody of your children. And even though women use almost 12 months of the parental leave when the baby is born, rates of breastfeeding have declined steeply over the past two decades. Today, only 75 percent of

mothers even start breastfeeding, which is down from 93 percent in 1998. And in the same year, 39 percent of mothers were still breastfeeding at six months compared to only 13 percent of women today.

So why does parenting matter? Parenting is transferred from generation to generation. And we should protect this silently transferred but highly important knowledge. And before replacing parents and the home environment, we should be very aware of the effects it might have on children. A child needs the close permanent emotional attachment during the first years, and child's healthy development is fostered through the adults they are deeply attached to and the consistent intimate interactions between them.

So the first years in life have a huge impact on the rest of our lives. And we have to see caring for young children as one of the most important societal tasks. It is the work that requires emotional commitment and must be taken seriously. And the question has to be: Who is responsible for the children and their emotional growth? Is it the parents, or is it the state? This is a highly relevant question for deciding on policy. The child's needs cannot be compromised with.

So Sweden has a feminist government, which claims that women and men must have the same power to shape society and their own lives. And this is a human rights and a matter of democracy and justice. But why does this not extend to caring for our children? In Article 252 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it says that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. But when it comes to prescriptions for achieving gender equality, much of the feminist movement in Sweden and elsewhere neglect children and motherhood. Excuse me.

So unpaid care is invisible, but it's the foundation of everything. In Sweden in 2021 though, full employment outside the home has become the norm for all working people and is pushed for, especially for women. And women who choose to stay at home are seen as backwards. The work they do is seen as a waste of resources. And they have even been called brains in vain by liberal female ministers.

So in European statistics, you are referred to as an inactive person. And I participated at a meeting at the European Institute for gender equality in Lithuania, and a man from Eurostat, he used that term. So I raised my hand and said it's not fair to call someone inactive when she, as in my case, took care of a family with five children and all the domestic work. It meant being present 24 hours a day, no leisure time, no vacation. And it's a challenging work. And at the same time, the most important, and you are anything but inactive.

So in order to make the care count and to make the inactive persons part of the system, we redistribute the unpaid work, and we force separations between children and mothers. So if another woman cares for my child, it is suddenly valued, but if I do it myself, it's invisible. The question is: Do we get the same outcome?

The goal is economic growth rather than human well-being. And the European Union so-called Lisbon targets, they had an agreement to reach 75 percent employment rate by 2020. That meant that women whether mothers or not are expected to go to work. And because of that, in 2002, there was another agreement made, and it was called the Barcelona Objectives. It was made to support the employment of women. And it stated that a specific percentage of children in Europe — I'm sorry, that they should attend childcare facilities in order to

support the mothers' employment. So 90 percent of children from age 3 to school age and at least 33 of children from birth age through age 2.

But all of this disregards what women want. The survey was done in 2011 by Make Mothers Matter, where almost 12,000 European women were asked about their preferences as mothers, and they said that being a mother was source of enormous joy. But they experienced the lack of choice, time, and recognition for their work. Twenty-six percent said they wanted to take full-time care of their families. Sixty-three percent prefer the combination of part-time employment and family care. And only 11 percent wanted to work full-time.

And Catherine Hakim from London School of Economics, she came with similar results in her preference theory in 1998. Twenty percent at home, 60 percent part-time work, and 20 percent full-time. And I was at a side event at the CSW Commission on the Status of Women at the UN and the former minister of gender equality, and now deputy executive director for UN women, Åsa Regnér, she was asked if Swedish parents don't get angry when you force them to share the parental leave. And she answered, "No, no, it's not a parental choice. It's a political will." And the consequences we see is that many Swedish women are increasingly ambivalent about becoming mothers.

And in 2019, the average age for a woman to have a first child was 29.6 years. And we have fewer and fewer children. And the birth rate was just 1.66 children per woman in 2020. Women are on sick leave more than men, especially between the ages of 30 and 40. The difference has grown steadily since the early 1980s until today. Women are on sick leave almost twice as often as men. Many women are sick because of stress. I used to be one of them. And one out of three women between the ages of 16 and 29 report feeling stressed. And sick leave in this group has increased by 370 percent since 2011.

Just like the world now focuses so heavily on economic growth, there is a similar focus on the cognitive education of children. But it is at the exclusion of children's emotional growth and well-being, which is the prerequisites for cognitive development in the first place. So the lack of emotional growth capital around the world should be high priority if we want human beings to develop and become more peaceful and caring than today. Wendy Elliot, founding director of Safe Childhood Movement in Great Britain, she said, "There is nothing wrong with seeking high educational standards and accountability. But there is surely something very wrong indeed if it comes at the cost of natural development."

And I would like to end with a story. Max, my sister's first son, he went to preschool, and it worked fine for him. And for his younger brother Ebbe though, it was a bad experience. They went to the same preschool but were separated into different groups despite the security, what it meant for him. Ebbe was crying and very upset when his parents left him every day. And this is something that is said to be normal and it will pass.

But one day when they got home, Max told his parents that when the 2-year-old Ebbe had to sit at a different table during mealtime, he had cried until he got a nosebleed. So Max couldn't understand why they treated his younger brother that way. And the teachers didn't tell the parents what had happened. So my sister and her husband took him out of that preschool immediately and had to manage the situation themselves. They worked in shifts and asked relatives for help.



So in Sweden, the option to make a different choice in this situation does not exist. You are on your own. And whatever decisions we make for our future, we have to prioritize children and their well-being. Thank you for listening.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Thank you so much, Madeleine. I've been juggling with what questions to start with. There's just been so much difficult, thoughtful ideas that you guys have put forward. And I am so appreciative to Caroline and Madeleine, to both of you sharing your personal experience in such a compelling way, and Ulla for providing such a clear and succinct context for the conversation.

So if we can take everyone off mute. I'd like to first ask if any of you have — any of the three participants have any thoughts or questions, comments on what the other people have said. Any thoughts you were provoked when listening to the other people that you want to add?

**Ulla Waldenström:** I've been very moved by your stories. And I really agree that there is a need to more choice and acceptance. And we are fighting for this from different angles. But at the same time, I think being a researcher, I feel a little bit uneasy when sort of everything — about cause and effect. What is cause and effect? I mean, there is a lot of problem in all our developed societies in terms of increasing mental health problems and stress and so forth and for women as well. And maybe more for women because our workload is heavier because there is an uneven divide load. If you combined — even if you work full-time, you usually do more at home than the male partner. But I think the cause and effect is much more complicated. There are so many other things that happen.

So I think one needs to be careful not to draw the conclusion that just because — that it's caused by universal childcare. I think that's to go too far. Because even if I am a critical voice in the Swedish debate, I think that both from my personal experience and from my picture of how preschool works, most parents are very satisfied with the quality. And I guess my view is that at least the majority of preschools work very well, but there are major problems.

So, I just think that it's important to get the balance right. How big are the problems? And what can we do? Because at the same time, we know that we may really want to be in the workforce. Most of us do want that, which, yeah, it sounds maybe a little bit diffused what I'm saying now. But I just react when you sort of get the feeling that everything is caused by the malfunctioning childcare in the public sector because that's not a correct picture in my view.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Caroline, Madeleine, do you want to add anything to that, make any comments?

**Madeleine Wallin:** Yeah, definitely. I totally agree because it's not the childcare itself. It's the other thing that you are forced to make certain choices. It's that we don't know what children need. So it's early separations from parents. It's not the preschool itself, not at all. You can have attachment in preschools as well. I have had my children in preschools, and I have friends who work as preschool teachers. And I could leave my children to them, but you need to know that you have relationships that last. So, you don't have different persons coming every year, because it's a very big part of your childhood, so it's very important.



I don't think we need to talk about — we definitely need to talk about the children and their needs. That is the main issue. And that we have to have different choices to be able to step back or to follow your child.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Caroline, do you have any thoughts you would like to add?

**Caroline Höglund:** Well, what I heard from Ulla is that maybe she got — maybe you thought about that women are not doing well, and that is like cause and effect that Madeleine brought up. But I don't think you think that either. But I think it's good that we point that out, of course. No, we don't know what a cause or effect of these things, but it's also something that I wish we could research more. And for me, my main issue is always like, how are the kids?

But yes, there are definitely — I mean, children are super adaptable, and I think there are many kids that will be absolutely fine going to preschool. But we just need different options and need to ensure that parents can see their child's needs and be valued for whatever option they make. So yeah.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Ulla, I have a question for you. I'm a big proponent of research also; I couldn't agree with you more about that. What is your explanation? I wrote down something you said that I thought was so powerful: To expose all the population in the most vulnerable period of human life, you need rigorous research on long-term effects. And your desire to — your observation there's a lack of knowledge about the lack of knowledge. Can you say a little bit more about that? How can we explain that? I also find this surprising. And how can we fix it?

**Ulla Waldenström:** Well, I think that there is also a political — I mean, in the Nordic countries, I think that both Caroline and Madeleine are right, that there is a sort of a political view, which sort of makes it difficult to have an open discussion with that. You're sort of — I think Madeleine is right that there is a norm, which is extremely strong, and that also affects the research. Because I have personal experience of sort of highlighting certain issues and feeling that I shouldn't criticize because then I'm against the whole system of universal childcare. And I think that's the major hurdle and the major problem.

If you cannot have an open discussion and also discuss things like children are different. So why have a system that is uniform, that everyone should fit into the same system? And just asking the questions make you feel, now, I've said something I shouldn't have said. And that kind of climate, which doesn't — it's not specific for Sweden. It's I think in many countries. It's such a sensitive issue to discuss how you care for your children.

And they trace this, of course, it's near to our hearts, most of us. And so depending on the choices that we have made ourselves, we react as if we are threatened by an open debate. And I think in Sweden, for instance, I think it's terrific that we have the option that all parents have the right to have a place in preschool and you have the right to say no.

And I'm very, very concerned about the suggestions by some politicians now that it should be compulsory from age 5 or age 4 or something like that, which really limits the freedom of choice and the possibility to adapt — well, to have new alternatives developing. I mean, I can even think of the thing that you, Madeleine, took up with — no, it was Caroline with the

allowance. So if every child that goes to preschool is allocated how many dollars was it per year, I mean —

**Caroline Höglund:** It's 18,500, I think.

**Ulla Waldenström:** It's a huge sum of money. So why couldn't those who want to be at home have at least part of that so that their economic situation could be easier? But then comes political arguments like equality, and also, especially you will have this problem with women coming from other countries, migrants who are overrepresented by women who have stay at home. So it sort of adds into this controversial question about class. Because these women have a lower level of education, and they want to stay home with their children. And maybe the first generation are not so inclined to learn our language, and the politicians want everyone to sort of conform to the Swedish model and become very Swedish very quickly.

And I think that there we have something to learn from many other countries like Canada and Australia and the US that maybe it takes — you need to be patient, and it may take a couple of generations before people really are sort of — what do you call it? Assimilated. Well, I'm just talking now. I think I lost the thread.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** I mean, the idea that we would be even beginning to address this subject in one and a half hours is sort of nuts. It's such an enormous subject. We want to start with a week at the very minimum. There was, in fact, on my end, quite a negative reaction to the fact that I was even holding this event, which I think Ulla to your point, something I'm still struggling with. I don't understand entirely why asking questions is so unacceptable in this area in particular. I've worked in other areas where I found that to be less the case, at least now.

But I do think that your point, which is that it has a kind of a chilling effect on the sort of research that would enable us to get a much better understanding of long-term effects on children. And maybe even research on the effects on parents, to Caroline and Madeleine's points. You know, what is it that we need to learn about how this does or does not affect a child-parent relationship? And I don't mean, you know, sort of this narrowly defined attachment, but more in terms of this larger picture of confidence and so forth.

I have a question that I want to ask you guys. In the United States, as you probably know, the recommendations, the high standard for both group sizes and ratios are considerably larger than in Sweden. So one of the aspects of a Swedish system that is celebrated here — for example, there's an article from just a couple of years ago, why preschool in Sweden rocks and what we can learn from them. And number two is low teacher-to-student ratio. This person wrote the ratios are roughly one to six, therefore, allowing teachers to observe, participate, and focus on each child and their development.

So what you guys are describing as a decline in quality at this point in the United States is being held up as a model, which concerns me a lot. Because of what we're trying to put into place is already even worse than what you guys are trying to address, that doesn't seem to bode well to me. But I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that.

If you have children — for young children to have ratios of one to five, one to six, which in this country we're so used to. There are states where the ratio for infants can be as big as five, or even six to one, with groups as large as 18, which is verging on kind of orphanage-

level care. I think it could be argued that it's just simply not possible to provide nurturing care to children in those situations. But because we have been struggling for so long with this kind of extreme situation, we will be happy if we can put into place an average of one to six or one to eight over the birth to 5 continuum. And I'm wondering what your advice to us is on that.

**Ulla Waldenström:** Well, if I can comment on that. I did say in the end of my presentation that I think that this wages system is of high quality compared with many other countries. So it has — I mean, there is an issue of how high expectations do we have. But I would like to add one component that hasn't been discussed, and that is number of hours that children spend in preschool. Because if, for instance, a child is there for four hours per day, and the group size is one to six or one to what? Even larger groups, that's not such a big problem as if they are there during the entire time, both parents work full-time. And with the traveling and so forth, many children spend more time in preschool than their parents do at work.

So I think that's an issue because at the same time, talking from my own experience, I have from my own children and from my children now being parents and so forth. Most of them are very pleased with preschool. But there is a pressure to pick up the child no later than 4:00 or maybe at 3:00. So it's quite unusual for those who have a choice to let the child spend 10 hours there, but that happens.

So you have this variation, depending on what child do you have. Does that child do well in a group? Does it enjoy being in a group? Can it be there how many hours? I mean, this flexibility based on both for parents to be able to work part-time. For instance, in my generation in Sweden, it was — I didn't have any friends who worked full-time when the children were small. I worked first 50 percent and then 70 percent. And there was this flexibility. That doesn't go for all kinds of jobs, but it was very common. And I guess we have to look at number of hours; that's my point.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** So we just got a comment, which I think doesn't apply to you guys as much as people might think it does. The question has to do with the lockdown, which I don't think you guys had a lockdown. As you know, many of our schools are closed. Many childcare centers have been closed, although many have now reopened. So, this woman, the question is: "During the lockdown, do you know how children are doing in Sweden? Are they happy being with their parents at home? At least my 3-year-old daughter says she doesn't need to go back to school. What are we going to do with these kids that don't want to go back?"

Which to me actually is a really amazing research opportunity. Because if you have a lot of little kids who have been at home, to ask them how they feel about that and how they feel about that relative to not being at home would be really interesting. We probably wouldn't be able to organize anything like that in time. But is that something that any of you are aware of? Is there any research that has asked young children how they feel about it? Do we have any evidence about how children feel about going to their school every day and young children, 2-year-old, 3-year-old, 4-year-old children? Madeline, do you have?

**Madeleine Wallin:** I don't know if we have research on that because, as you said, we didn't have a lockdown and preschools have been open all the time. But what I know is that the stress of women, it has gone down last year.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Women's stress went down?

**Madeleine Wallin:** Yeah.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Interesting. And I know, Madeleine, to another point, you and I have talked quite a bit about the emotional needs of children and your concerns about the capacity of a classroom environment to address those. Do you want to say a little bit about your thoughts on that?

**Madeleine Wallin:** What did you say about classroom?

**Katharine B. Stevens:** That you and I have talked about your feelings about the emotional needs of children and the extent to which your worries, it's hard to address them in a classroom environment, at least for some children.

**Madeleine Wallin:** It's difficult to see when a child doesn't get their needs met. Because if you are under the age of 2 or 3 and if you cannot speak for yourself and there are too many other children, your emotions, you have to lock down. Because when you don't have your needs met, what do you do? You cannot trust the environment, and you have to lock down. So it doesn't show that you are — you keep on playing. You keep on playing, and it's like you act like a normal child, but you are like protected. We need children to be open and emotional and when — I can't explain now, Caroline, please.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Caroline, do you want to?

**Caroline Höglund:** So I mean for me, it's just imagining myself in a setting where I took care of like six kids or something, how am I going to manage to see every child when they like get hurt or something happens? That's like one of the things I usually think about. But this also made me think about the Danish researcher that observed in preschools, I can't remember his name. Madeleine, do you remember?

**Madeleine Wallin:** Ulla Henry Thompson.

**Caroline Höglund:** Study him. And he really talked about these — he was really moved with what he saw. I think he was for a very long time he was in preschools looking. And he like brought up the problem with that when a small child is sad, they need to be comforted. So we need to be there, you know, right at the moment when it happens, from a moment to moment, and help them regulate their emotions, especially for small kids. But yeah, Madeleine, you wanted to say.

**Madeleine Wallin:** That's what I wanted to say, that small children, they cannot regulate their emotions themselves. If they are sad, they cannot comfort themselves. So, somebody else needs to do that for them. So it's the very first years, we really need to have this one-to-one care. And the child needs the primary caregivers. So it's crucial, actually, during the first three years.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** So you guys, we are just at the end. I would love to ask each of you to just share any last thoughts. I'm hoping that this is a conversation that we can continue all three of you, and I'm sure you have colleagues as well, other colleagues, I think are an

extraordinary resource for us. And I hope that people here draw on you more than we have so far. So maybe one minute each. Ulla, do you want to start?

**Ulla Waldenström:** I just want to thank you. And I would have appreciated maybe more voices from the American context and also reactions to what we have said from Sweden. But maybe some other time.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** That's a very good idea, Ulla. That's a very good idea. I would love to organize an event like that. That was a dialogue with people here so that you can — I think that would be fabulous. It's a good idea.

**Ulla Waldenström:** Yeah, because I think that I would have liked to know how many women percentage-wise in the US who really feel that they cannot go into the workforce because they don't have any childcare. How big is that problem? Because there is always this balance between interests. I mean, most women want to have a job and work, and at the same time, we want to be good parents, and we want equality. There are so many things that sort of collide, and you have to have this balance.

I mean, I'm thinking of, for instance, having the optimal quality in preschool. How much would it cost? How much can a society afford to pay without increasing the fee? And if we increase the fee, then we have problems, that it's only the well-educated who have access, those who earn a lot of money.

So there are these political issues that are interesting and important to discuss. How come that we can have preschool with this very low fee that just covers 8 percent of the cost for the whole population? How come women's entry into the workforce the gap between Sweden and the US so 20 percent? Would that provide sufficient taxes to pay for that, so that that would be a model for the US? I mean, that's kind of questions that I would also be interested in discussing.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Absolutely. Yeah. I would love to follow up with subsequent meetings or events to address these questions because I do think the cross-country comparisons are so valuable. Madeleine, do you have a minute for any last thoughts?

**Madeleine Wallin:** I think we can have it all, but maybe not at the same time. And I think it's such a difficult issue to talk about this. And I have felt a lot of pressure, because you don't want to criticize your country. You don't even want to criticize the system, because you're part of it and you are also proud of it. And you are part of making these decisions yourself. But I think we really need to be more aware of what we do.

We need to step out of ourselves and look at society, look at families. How are they doing? How are children doing? Do we actually see the effects that the preschool should have? We don't see it. We don't see the school results. We don't see well-being. So we really need to start how to make people to feel better, the well-being for human beings.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Thank you, Madeleine. Caroline, any last thoughts?

**Caroline Höglund:** Yeah, just a quick thought. It is super complex, all of this, but I just hope that we always can be transparent of what we're doing and that we always think about

what children need and how we can make it as good as possible for them and as well for parents because they are our coming generation, so yeah.

**Katharine B. Stevens:** Well, I want to thank all three of you very, very, very much for putting so much work and thought into sharing with us today. And I am very much hoping that we'll find ways to continue this conversation. And thank you very much to our audience for joining us.