

PROVISION OF CHILDCARE SERVICES IN ROVANIEMI, FINLAND

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The Town of Rovaniemi and the County of Rovaniemi merged on 1 January 2006 to become Europe's largest town in terms of area coverage. The new town has a population of approximately 60,000 inhabitants and has a distinctly densely constructed town centre with villages surrounding the centre over a large area. The day care services of the new town have been geographically split into four Day Care Districts; Ounasvaara, Saarenkylä, Alakemijoki and town centre-Ounasjoki. In all four districts, day care services are provided according to the requirements of children and families. The division of the town as described sets big challenges on the Town to provide equal standard day care services throughout the town's regions. The most challenging places for catering for requirements is in the sparsely populated regions where distances are large and the regions only have a handful of children residents under school age.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON DAY CARE SERVICES

In Finland, every child has a subjective right to receive day care services in accordance with the Day Care Act. The child still holds this right irrespective of whether the child's parents are employed, students, unemployed or otherwise stay at home. Over the past few days there has been a great deal of discussion on the national level on this subjective day care right and the possible restrictions of such a right.

There are a number of alternatives in Rovaniemi for arranging child day care. Day care may be arranged in the town's own day care centres, outsourced day care centres or in private family day care. In addition, private care support may be obtained for the child, and with municipal supplements also in private day care centres or family day care centres. It is also possible for the guardian to care for the child at home with the state home care subsidy. Day care is arranged in accordance with the Day Care Act and related statutes. Legislation precisely specifies how each form of care may be arranged and with what staff.

The Town of Rovaniemi is home to a total of 4,439 children under school age. Approximately 61% of children under school age attend day care, i.e. approximately 2,600 children. Approximately 2,230 children attend day care centres and approximately 370 children attend private family day care facilities. Additionally, the total number of children receiving private care subsidies and municipal supplements is approximately 90, and approximately 1,000 children receiving home care subsidies. A full 100 % of six-year-old children attend preschool education free of charge.

The Town of Rovaniemi has 32 municipal day care units, of which 29 are day care centres and 3 private family group day care homes. Furthermore, 16 private day care centres operate in the town area, 14 of which sell their day care services to the Town of Rovaniemi, two operating with private care support and municipal supplements. The day care payment is larger for families with children attending day care units, which are funded by private care support and municipal supplements, and is higher than the charge for children attending the municipal day care units or municipally outsourced day care facilities. A total of approximately one hundred family day carers work in their own home or the child's home. The number of employees working in day care is approximately 600 persons.

Day care services in the Town of Rovaniemi are provided according to the requirements of children and families. The services provided comprise:

1. full day care
2. half day care
3. shift care 24 hours a day
4. evening care till 10 p.m.
5. special day care in various forms
6. open day care centres
7. free of charge pre-school education

DAY CARE DEVELOPMENT WORK

At the beginning of the year, a **Family Service Centre** was established in the Town of Rovaniemi, where administrators of services for children and families work under the same roof. Collaboration between various administrators has become easier and a multi-professional working environment has been facilitated for the benefit of children and families. The premises have, for instance, a special day care resource centre, child health clinic, maternity clinic, family work, child protection, open day care centre, family facility, a variety of therapeutic services and a family health clinic. The open day care centre is the newest form of day care provided by the Town of Rovaniemi, which has initiated activities on the floor below the Family Service Centre in the town centre. The intention is to initiate similar activities in each of the four day care districts.

The **open day care centre facility** is free of charge and no pre-arrangements need to be made with the facility. The open day care centre is a meeting place for children and families. It is intended for children under school age and the parents and carers who take care of these children at home. In the open day care centre, the parents have the opportunity to meet other families and children have the chance to make new friendships, play and practice social skills with other children and adults. Parents may talk about raising children, child development, parenthood and the everyday life of a family with children with either other families or some professionals in the field. Activities are based on active togetherness where parents look after their children. The programme includes free time to spend together, play, sharing daily experiences, guided activities, and by request from the parents, visits from experts and other additional programmes.

Approximately 30% of all families with children are single-parent families, and there are a very large number of children that are taken into custody. These issues pose their own special challenge for the provision of day care and for any possible special support needs. **Children in particular need of support** are integrated into regular day care groups that have regular children role models. In this way a child in need of special support will feel as normal as any of the other children in the same group.

The day care service provided for children in need of special support is arranged in accordance with a long-developed care scaling, as follows:

1. one or two children with special needs may be placed in a regular day care group;
2. they can be supported by a personal or group assistant in a regular day care group
3. in a smaller day care group, or in so-called small groups with a total of 15 children, ten of which are children in need of support and five in need of special support;

4. integrated special groups with a total of 12 children, seven of which are children in need of support and five in need of special support.

The number of circulating special kindergarten teachers in Rovaniemi is larger than the national average. A total of five of these special kindergarten teachers work to support day care in the special day care resource centre. In addition, one special kindergarten teacher works in each of the four integrated special groups. There is one integrated special group for children with language and communication problems, one for the mentally handicapped, and two for children with slow development. There are fifty special assistants working as children's personal or group-specific assistants. The special day care resource centre operates in the family service centre and has a concentration of circulating special kindergarten teachers and special assistants. Support may be centrally coordinated for the requirements of special children in the areas.

Early observation as a form of working in clinics and day care centres will help the children requiring special support become more apparent already during the initial stages. Co-operation with the educational and social services has been regular, especially in respect to children requiring special support, and co-operation with a number of different bodies has achieved some good results with children requiring special support being transferred from day care to school. One of the reasons for attaining such favourable results is the competent, committed and motivated staff.

The quality of day care has been developed with a quality development project implemented in co-operation with the University of Oulu and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. One of the special characteristics of quality development is the involvement of the children's parents in the development work for the quality of day care services. Each day care centre has its own quality group that also includes representation from the children's parents. The purpose of the quality group is to discuss and develop together the quality of their own day care. Common quality criteria have been compiled for day care, in adherence to which day care should be developed, and in accordance with which the quality of day care can be assessed. The day care customer questionnaire is formulated on the basis of these jointly agreed quality criteria.

An **early development plan** has been drawn-up for each day care unit, and some day care centres even have such a plan for each individual group. The staff is responsible for drawing up the early development plan for their unit and it should be possible for the parents to be involved by having their say on the content of the early development plan for their unit and participate in its assessment together with other parents. A municipal early education plan for the day care of the entire town is currently being compiled. Each child has his/her own early education plan. The children's own early education plan is compiled in co-operation with the children's parents and a significant force in the compilation of the early education plan is planning the education in partnership. The day care for the children is planned in co-operation with the parents, and furthermore it is also assessed in co-operation with the parents.

In the Town of Rovaniemi, day care is mainly provided in Finnish, but a new form of care recently introduced is the **Sámi language day care**. In accordance with relevant legislation, children have the right to receive day care services in their native language (Finnish, Swedish, Sámi). There have been a total of four children attending Sámi language day care, and the numbers are due to rise starting in the autumn. The challenge is to make the way of implementing Sámi language day care as functional as possible. At the moment, Sámi language day care is provided in groups of children under the age of three years, where the child has its own carer who speaks Northern Sámi as their mother tongue. The entire day care activities related to these children are performed using Sámi language every day.

There are currently around 10 – 15 children under school age living in Rovaniemi who speak Northern Sámi as their native language.