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# **Flexibly-scheduled early childhood education and care: Finnish mothers' and educators' perceptions on young children's experiences and child-responsive practices**

## **Abstract**

The study explores Finnish mothers' and educators' perceptions on young children's experiences and child-responsive practices related to flexibly-scheduled early childhood education and care (ECEC). Data were gathered by ethnography-based interviews with mothers and educators of one- to three-year-old children attending this form of ECEC and qualitatively analysed using the method of inductive content analysis. According to the interviewees, young children experienced a multitude of feelings related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC, ranging from the undesirable, such as strain, distress and confusion, to the desirable, such as comfort, satisfaction and understanding. The children's feelings were associated with different kinds of nonstandard ECEC schedules and the effects of these on their daily activities and social interactions. Child-responsive practices described by the interviewees included adjusting daily schedules, activities and social interactions at home and in ECEC to children's daily rhythms and needs. The findings point to the importance of taking young children's perspectives into account when seeking to enhance their wellbeing in the context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC.

**Keywords:** early childhood education and care; flexibly-scheduled care; day and night care; nonstandard schedules; child care; Finland

## **Résumé**

Cette recherche explore les perceptions de mères et d'éducateurs finlandais relativement aux expériences des jeunes enfants et aux pratiques sensibles aux enfants en lien avec des services de garde et d'éducation à la petite enfance à horaire flexible. Les données ont été recueillies par des interviews de type ethnographique des mères et des éducateurs d'enfants de un à trois ans, fréquentant ce type de services et ont été analysées qualitativement avec la méthode d'analyse inductive de contenu. Selon les personnes interrogées, les jeunes enfants ont ressenti une multitude de sentiments liés à ces services à horaire flexible, allant de sentiments indésirables de tension, détresse et confusion, à des sentiments désirables de confort, satisfaction et compréhension. Les sentiments des enfants étaient liés à différentes sortes d'horaires atypiques de services et les effets

de ces derniers sur leurs activités quotidiennes et leurs interactions sociales. Parmi les pratiques sensibles aux enfants décrites par les personnes interrogées se trouve l'ajustement quotidien des horaires, des activités et des interactions sociales à la maison et au service aux rythmes et besoins quotidiens des enfants. Les résultats soulignent l'importance de tenir compte des perspectives des enfants lorsqu'on cherche à améliorer leur bien-être dans le contexte des services de garde et d'éducation à la petite enfance à horaire flexible.

## **Resumen**

El presente estudio explora las percepciones de madres y educadores finlandeses acerca de las experiencias de niños pequeños y prácticas ajustadas a la respuesta de los niños relacionadas con una educación y atención infantil temprana flexible. Por medio de entrevistas etnográficas a madres y educadores de niños de uno a tres años de edad, que asistían a programas de educación y atención infantil temprana, se recolectó información que fue luego analizada cualitativamente utilizando el método de análisis de contenido inductivo. Con base en las repuestas de los entrevistados, los niños pequeños experimentaron varios sentimientos relacionados con prácticas flexibles en la educación y atención infantil: desde sentimientos indeseables tales como tensión, estrés y confusión, hasta aquellos deseables como comodidad, satisfacción y comprensión. Los sentimientos de los niños estuvieron asociados con diferentes tipos de programas de educación infantil temprana flexible y sus efectos sobre sus actividades e interacciones sociales diarias. Las prácticas ajustadas a la perspectiva de los niños que fueron mencionadas por los entrevistados incluyeron ajuste de rutinas diarias, actividades e interacciones sociales en casa y en la escuela, para las necesidades diarias de los niños y sus ritmos. Los resultados resaltan la importancia de tener en cuenta la perspectiva de niños pequeños en pos del mejoramiento de su bienestar en el contexto de programas flexibles de educación y atención infantil temprana.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A significant number of young Finnish children attend flexibly-scheduled ECEC, a form of ECEC that includes evenings, nights and/or weekends, according to their family's needs. Previous studies (De Schipper et al. 2003; Sevón et al. 2017) have suggested that, because it supports a less stable daily life, flexibly-scheduled ECEC may impair child wellbeing, particularly that of the youngest children. However, we know little about young children's daily lives in this specific context. Most

importantly, we lack knowledge of the experiences of one- to three-year-old children attending this form of ECEC. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring Finnish mothers' and educators' perceptions on the experiences of children in this age-group attending flexibly-scheduled ECEC. The study also contributes to knowledge of practices supportive of young children's wellbeing in this context.

### **Flexibly-scheduled ECEC in Finland**

Following the global shift towards the 24/7 economy (see Presser 2003), many parents of young children work nonstandard hours, i.e. evenings, nights and/or weekends, sometimes on a varying basis (Li et al. 2014). As standard ECEC services do not meet the needs of these families, Finnish municipalities organize flexibly-scheduled ECEC (also known as day and night care and around-the-clock care) for families where both parents, or a single parent, work nonstandard hours. This service enables children to attend ECEC according to their parents' work schedules, which may include a combination of standard daytime and nonstandard hours.

Although flexibly-scheduled ECEC is not limited to Finland, the systematic organisation of the service in Finland is unique internationally. In Finland, flexibly-scheduled ECEC is a formal component of public ECEC services, and thus is included in the general legislation on the provision of ECEC (see Rönkä et al. 2017). It is implemented by trained nurses and kindergarten teachers (henceforth educators) in day care centres of two kinds: centres with extended opening hours (e.g. from 5.00 am to 10.30 pm) from Monday to Friday and centres open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In the year 2013, over 14 000 Finnish children – that is, 7% of all children in public ECEC – attended flexibly-scheduled ECEC (Säkkinen 2014).

### **Young children's daily lives in the context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC**

Depending on their individual family situations (including parental work schedules, family form and childcare arrangements outside of public ECEC), young children's experiences of flexibly-scheduled ECEC may differ widely. For some children, this form of ECEC is conducive to more positive moods in the flow of their daily lives, possibly due to schedules well suited to their needs, including fewer hours and days in ECEC (see Sevón et al. 2017). For others, however, flexibly-scheduled ECEC may entail longer hours in ECEC, contributing to heightened levels of child stress, especially in the younger children (see Vermeer and Van IJzendoorn 2006). Flexibly-scheduled ECEC thus presents challenges as well as conferring benefits.

Previous studies on flexibly-scheduled child care arrangements (De Schipper et al. 2003; Salonen et al. 2016) have pointed to the challenges posed by the individual, uncoordinated schedules of children and educators. In their study on six- to 30-month-old children, De Schipper, Tavecchio, Van IJzendoorn and Linting (2003) found that more flexibly-scheduled child care was associated with less daily stability in caregivers, peer contacts and programme structure. These negative outcomes of flexibly-scheduled child care may challenge children's ability to manage their social interactions and feel comfortable in their day care setting (De Schipper et al. 2003). In line with these results, Salonen, Laakso and Sevón (2016) observed that the possibilities of 20- to 36-month-old children for constructing their membership and sense of belonging upon arrival at day and night care (i.e. flexibly-scheduled ECEC) varied as their arrivals took place in varying social surroundings and during differing daily activities. Sevón, Rönkä, Räikkönen and Laitinen (2017) also found in their mobile diary study that four- to seven-year-old children in day and night care showed more irregular mood rhythms than children in regular day care. Although the challenges related to flexible scheduled ECEC did not become apparent in their study, the findings point to the potential negative impact on young children, in the context of parental nonstandard work, of irregularity in their daily routines (Sevón et al. 2017; see also Rosenbaum and Morett 2009; Spagnola and Fiese 2007).

On the other hand, several studies have addressed the benefits of flexibly-scheduled ECEC. In the above-mentioned study by Sevón et al. (2017), the children in day and night care showed less negative moods during the mornings than the children in regular day care. This finding suggests that children benefit from the unhurried mornings related to parental evening shifts and days off during the week. Moreover, the children in day and night care showed more positive moods during the evenings than regular day-care children (Sevón et al. 2017). Their positive moods could be an outcome of schedules that were suited to the children (e.g. short hours) or of the special features of nonstandard hours ECEC that have been noted by several researchers (Rönkä et al. 2017; Halfon and Friendly 2015; Statham and Mooney 2003). These features include greater flexibility in routines and more freedom of choice for children, and stem from the fact that fewer children are present at ECEC during nonstandard hours. Moreover, some studies (Jordan 2008; De Schipper et al. 2003) suggest that educators may make extra efforts to alleviate the challenges related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC. For example, De Schipper et al. (2003) found that lower daily stability, typical of flexibly-scheduled child care arrangements, was related to more positive caregiving behaviour towards toddlers and preschool-age children. Through this kind of sensitive interaction towards young children, caregivers may seek to compensate for the perceived challenges related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC and make efforts to support young children's sense of belonging in the ECEC context (see Salonen et al. 2016).

### **The current study**

This study aimed at contributing to knowledge on one- to three-year-old children's experiences of flexibly-scheduled ECEC and on practices supportive of their wellbeing. To study the relationship between the daily experiences of very young children and the larger context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC, it was necessary to rely on mothers' and educators' perceptions. The interview discussions, however, were grounded on ethnographic observations of individual young children attending

flexibly-scheduled ECEC and on their mothers' and educators' familiarity with the children.

Specifically, the study addressed the following two research questions:

1. How, according to their mothers and educators, do young children experience flexibly-scheduled ECEC?
2. What kinds of child-responsive practices related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC do mothers and educators report using?

## **METHOD**

### **Research context**

The study is a part of the first author's ethnographic dissertation study on young children's social and emotional wellbeing in the context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC. The dissertation study was conducted within an international research project "Children's socio-emotional wellbeing and daily family life in a 24-h economy (Families 24/7)". The project employed multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to explore and compare the effects of nonstandard work schedules on family life and children in three European countries: Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The perspectives of parents, ECEC personnel and children of different ages were considered. In this sub-study, the focus was on the youngest children in Finnish flexibly-scheduled ECEC.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from two municipal day care centres offering flexibly-scheduled ECEC: a centre with extended opening hours from 5.00 am to 10.30 pm from Monday to Friday and a centre open for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Written information about the study was given to all the parents and educators of children in the under-three groups. Eight parents gave their informed consent for ethnographic observation of their child's daily life in the context of

flexibly-scheduled ECEC. Information on these children is presented in Table 1. The number of ECEC hours per week for each child, indicated in Table 1, is based on data received across the data collection period of eight months.

--Table 1 about here--

Five of the parents also gave their informed consent to an interview complementing the observations. These parents were all mothers (three coupled and two single mothers) although a similar opportunity to participate in an interview was initially given to both mothers and fathers. Four of the mothers worked two or three irregularly varying shifts and one worked a more regular schedule that included evenings and weekends. Their children attended flexibly-scheduled ECEC mainly according to their mothers' work schedules. In one case, however, the child's parents practised partial 'tag-team parenting' (see Hattery 2001) to reduce their child's ECEC hours.

Furthermore, seven educators (six nurses and one kindergarten teacher) gave their informed consent to an interview. All had experience in administering flexibly-scheduled ECEC to children in this age group. Moreover, the educators were familiar with the children participating in the ethnographic observations in their ECEC setting.

### **Data collection**

The ethnographic observations of the daily lives of the eight young children were made from May 2012 to December 2012. The observations included 41 visits to the day care centres and five to the children's homes, each visit lasting from 0.5 to 2.5 hours. The semi-structured interviews with the mothers and educators, conducted from October 2012 to February 2013, were designed based on the knowledge gained from these observations. The aim of the interviews was to deepen



understanding of the daily lives of the focus children. The educator interviews also aimed at providing more general information concerning flexibly-scheduled ECEC for young children.

The interviews with mothers took place at a site of the mothers' choice: one interview at the mother's home and four at the child's day care centre. All the educator interviews took place at their day care centres. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The interview themes most relevant for the study concerned young children's experiences and everyday practices as these related to nonstandard ECEC schedules. All the interviewees had views on both the home and ECEC contexts, although the mothers' views on the ECEC context were mainly based on information from educators and the views of the latter on the children's home contexts were mainly based on information from the mothers. The interviews were recorded and, after carefully listening to the recordings, the discussions pertaining to flexibly-scheduled ECEC were transcribed. These discussions, amounting to 140 text pages, constituted the data for analysis.

## **Analysis**

The data were analysed qualitatively using the method of inductive content analysis (see Elo and Kyngäs 2008). First, a total of 93 descriptions of young children's experiences were identified from the data: 36 by the mothers and 57 by the educators. In these descriptions, the interviewees typically discussed young children's feelings and their behavioural manifestations pertaining to different flexibly-scheduled ECEC contexts. Each experience concerned one feeling or several intertwined feelings, such as tiredness and irritation, associated with long hours spent in ECEC. In cases where the feeling was not explicitly named by an interviewee, it was inferred from the behavioural manifestation of the feeling, such as crying when separating from the mother. The experiences were then grouped into five main categories based on the feelings and their contexts (see Table 2).

--Table 2 about here--

Second, 57 descriptions of child-responsive practices were identified from the data: 20 by the mothers and 37 by the educators. Each description concerned one practice or several intertwined practices that alleviated the challenges presented to young children by nonstandard ECEC schedules. Six sub-categories were formulated from the child-responsive practices based on their content, and these categories were further grouped into two main categories based on the aim of the practices (see Table 3).

--Table 3 about here--

## **FINDINGS**

The findings section first focuses on the five main categories of feelings that emerged from the data on young children's experiences, as described in Table 2; and then on the two main categories identified in the data related to child-responsive practices as described by the mothers and the educators, as outlined in Table 3. The examples illustrating the findings are shortened extracts from descriptions given in the interviews.

### **Young children's experiences related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC**

#### *Tiredness and associated feelings related to ECEC schedules unsuited to young children's daily rhythms*

Apart from one mother, all the interviewees talked about the tiredness and various associated feelings they had observed in young children as a result of ECEC schedules unsuited to the children's daily rhythms of activity, rest and sleep (henceforth shortened to daily rhythms; see Table 2). Due to unsuitable schedules, some children were perceived as experiencing tiredness-

related difficulties in performing daily tasks, such navigating the transition between home and ECEC, coping with separation from their family members, concentrating in play activities and daily routines in ECEC, and even staying awake until sleep time. In these situations, the children were variously perceived as restless, boisterous or tearful. Also, they were described as manifesting or experiencing feelings of dislike, separation anxiety, irritation, anger, exhaustion, strain and longing.

Anna described the experiences of her daughter Jenni on arrival at the ECEC centre at nap time, whereas Helena spoke more generally about the experiences of young children attending morning ECEC after ECEC the previous evening.

She finds arriving at nap time the most challenging. ... She may feel a bit irritated and tired just before coming to day care. ... Then she may cry for me more when I leave for work, as she is kind of overtired at that point. (Anna, mother)

It is hard for young children, these changing shifts are so difficult. ... Some children may stay till 10 pm and then return at 7 am. ... You then see them almost falling asleep at the lunch table. (Helena, educator)

In these descriptions, tiredness stemming from the unsuitable timing of ECEC is accompanied with feelings of irritation and separation anxiety (manifested by crying after the mother) as well as challenges in performing daily tasks in ECEC (lunch routines). Essentially, these challenges result from schedules that conflict with young children's daily rhythms and thus disregard their needs for rest and sleep.

***Ease and comfort related to ECEC schedules suited to young children's daily rhythms***

Nonstandard ECEC schedules, however, were not necessarily perceived as unsuitable. In some cases, they were described as highly compatible with a child's daily rhythms, allowing sufficient rest and sleep. Except for one mother, all the interviewees discussed nonstandard ECEC schedules of this kind in relation to their perceptions of young children's feelings (see Table 2). According to these interviewees, the schedules suited the young children's daily rhythms, preventing them from getting too tired or strained and thereby helping them to better perform their daily tasks. Moreover, these schedules were described as enhancing the children's feelings of ease and comfort.

Heidi described the feelings of her two daughters, Noora and her big sister, about short hours in ECEC, whereas Hanna reflected on the feelings of her son Oliver regarding mornings at home before attending evening ECEC.

The girls usually have short hours and plenty of days off. ... It is easier as it is only a brief moment. (Heidi, mother)

He's the kind of young man who's sleepy in the mornings, and he finds it comfortable when he can sleep in and I don't have to suddenly wake him up. (Hanna, mother)

According to Heidi and Hanna, specific features of nonstandard schedules – short hours spent in ECEC and leisurely mornings at home – contribute to feelings of ease and comfort in young children as they match the children's daily rhythms, allowing them leisure time and sufficient rest at home.

*Satisfaction, enjoyment and joy related to features of ECEC characteristic of evenings and weekends*

Interestingly, two of the mothers and one of the educators also described young children as manifesting positive feelings when attending ECEC during evenings and weekends (see Table 2). As fewer children attended the day care centre during these times, those who were present received more individual attention from the educators. For the same reason, the practices entailed more flexibility, and these children had possibilities for play that were not available to them during daytime hours. Furthermore, children from different age-groups were typically brought together during evenings, and therefore the younger children could play with older peers or siblings. According to many of the interviewees, these features of ECEC evoked feelings of satisfaction, enjoyment and joy in young children.

Such feelings were mentioned by Maria and Hanna, who considered evening ECEC from the perspective of young children.

Children have the time and peace for play, as we don't have to watch the clock in the evenings. ... Then you can see the children's satisfaction and know that the evening has been a really nice time for them. (Maria, educator)

They enjoy evening time as it is so different. It has its own rules, you can play with older peers and you can play in different ways than normally. (Hanna, mother)

In these descriptions, evening ECEC is characterized as a leisurely time for special play activities and peer contacts. According to Maria and Hanna, these features make evening ECEC particularly satisfying and enjoyable for young children.

***Confusion, uncertainty and distress related to the variability of daily life***

Three of the mothers and three of the educators discussed young children's feelings of confusion, uncertainty and distress caused by the variability of daily life in flexibly-scheduled ECEC owing to the varying, uncoordinated schedules of children and educators (see Table 2). These feelings were reported as more typical of children whose schedules showed wide variation or irregularity (children attending day care centres open 24/7). Also, distress related to unpredictable social encounters was described as more typical of children who had recently started attending flexibly-scheduled ECEC and of children with a more inhibited temperament. It is important to note that, despite the varying nature of the social environment, the interviewees also commonly described long-lasting and important social relations in flexibly-scheduled ECEC that seemed no different from those in standard ECEC.

Maria described her views on young children with varying ECEC schedules. She began by talking about her previous observations in a centre open 24/7 and then continued by describing her present perceptions in a centre with extended opening hours.

In a centre open 24/7 the children don't necessarily know whether they are going to have naps or night sleep, and when their mum's coming. ... These children understand it better. Still, sometimes they are really confused when we go back indoors after outings in the afternoon. Some may start to cry, because they are usually picked up during these outings, and so they are expecting that. (Maria, educator)

According to Maria, children coming and going at different times may be confused about the flow of daily life, particularly in a centre open 24/7. If their expectations are not met, they may express their distress by crying. Another interviewee, Susanna, described her son Eemil's reactions to unpredictable encounters with educators on arrival at ECEC.

He always observes really carefully which educators are present when I bring him. Then he whispers “Helena” and “I can hear Leena’s voice”. And if he then sees someone like his real favourite, he’s like “Yes, Mari’s here”. (Susanna, mother)

In Susanna’s description, Eemil’s behaviour and whispering voice betrays uncertainty. In contrast to this feeling, Susanna also mentions the associated feeling of delight Eemil expresses when he meets an educator dear to him. These observations indicate that the child has important relationships with some of the educators in the day care centre, despite variation in the social environment.

### ***Familiarity, understanding and trustfulness in relation to the variability of daily life***

Not all the interviewees considered the variability of daily life as confusing to young children. Three of the mothers and two of the educators suggested that the children got somewhat used to their varying ECEC schedules or to unpredictable social encounters in ECEC. Once they were familiar with their ECEC schedules, children seemed to show some understanding of the flow of events. Moreover, encounters with unfamiliar educators eventually made them more trusting of different adults (see Table 2).

Susanna described her son Eemil’s experiences of attending ECEC at varying times.

He is kind of used to staying overnight and having long hours at times. So that on the way to day care, he asks whether he’ll be staying for naps or overnight. ... And the educators often say that after being there for an evening and the following morning he starts asking in the afternoon when am I coming to pick him up. Yes, he somehow understands it.

(Susanna, mother)

Based on Eemil's questions, Susanna infers that he is used to his ECEC schedules and can therefore anticipate the time of departure. For this young boy, then, his varying times of attendance seem to be quite understandable. Another interviewee, Jonna, talked about the experiences of young children in relation to unpredictable social encounters.

The children here are so used to varying and unfamiliar people that they rely on the help of any adult. When you go to a standard day care centre, the children are like "Help, who's that," and they may be tense, but here they are used to changes in personnel. (Jonna, educator)

Jonna finds young children in flexibly-scheduled ECEC to be particularly trusting of unfamiliar educators. The descriptions by Susanna and Jonna demonstrate that a variable daily life in the context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC may, after all, become the norm for young children.

### **Child-responsive practices related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC**

#### ***Managing tiredness-related challenges***

All the interviewees reported using child-responsive practices at home or in ECEC that alleviated the tiredness-related challenges faced by young children because of their nonstandard ECEC schedules (see Table 3). The mothers, in particular, described adjusting their child's ECEC schedules to his or her daily rhythms or needs for sleep and rest. In one two-parent family, long hours in ECEC were avoided through partial tag-team parenting. Also, many of the mothers made small adjustments to their child's ECEC schedules to allow for maximal leisure time, proper naps and arrivals at ECEC at times matching their child's daily rhythms. Susanna compared the suitability of two alternative evening arrival times for her son Eemil.



Sometimes I bring him before lunch and naps. Then occasionally I have brought him at one (p.m.), but then I have a feeling that he doesn't get long enough naps. I notice when he doesn't get proper naps as he's really tired in the evenings then. So it is better to come earlier so that he gets proper naps. (Susanna, mother)

As nap time at ECEC begins around 12 a.m., Susanna considers arrivals at 1.00 p.m. unsuitable for Eemil. By bringing him somewhat earlier, Susanna helps him avoid tiredness-related challenges during the evening that follows.

The interviewees also described adjusting daily activities at home and in ECEC to conform to young children's needs for sleep and rest with the aim of helping the children cope with schedules that do not necessarily match their daily rhythms. Most importantly, energetic and highly structured activities were avoided when children were tired. Instead, children were provided with restful activities, as described by Maria.

After the evening snack we don't have boisterous play, but something restful. However, if we read a book then some children may even fall asleep. So we have quite often sung songs and read short rhymes on the floor during late evening hours. In that way we do something restful, but not too restful anyway. (Maria, educator)

By her careful choice of activities during evenings in ECEC, Maria helps tired young children not only to calm down before their night's sleep, but also to stay awake until their late departure from ECEC.

The interviewees also supported tired young children through special attention and physical closeness. According to the mothers, this kind of support was helpful during late transitions between home and ECEC and in the home context after long hours in ECEC. The

educators saw these features of social interaction as particularly important during evenings and nights, sensitive times when young children attending ECEC were more prone to experience tiredness and longing. Kaarina described the routines of settling young children down for the night in ECEC.

I pay attention to each child personally and if someone cries I take him into my lap. ...  
Then you stay in the dormitory until everyone is asleep and you come back at night as needed. (Kaarina, educator)

Based on Kaarina's description, young children in night care receive special attention from the educator, who responds to any expression of unrest by a young child, no matter what the reason or time.

### ***Enhancing familiarity and predictability***

Two of the mothers and five of the educators mentioned child-responsive practices that alleviated the confusion and uncertainty of varying ECEC schedules and an unpredictable social environment by making the flow of daily life more familiar and predictable for young children (see Table 3). The interviewees underlined the importance of maintaining regular routines, such as mealtimes, sleep and outings both at home and in ECEC, regardless of irregular ECEC schedules. One of the educators also highlighted the importance of common practices across all ECEC educators in a centre so that the rules are the same no matter which of them is in charge. Moreover, some interviewees found it helpful for young children if the daily routines between home and ECEC were coordinated. Hanna described how her son Oliver experienced this practice.

Our daily routines are just about the same as in day care, so that we have breakfast at eight and lunch at 11, no matter whether we have a day off or whatever. If we are to arrive at day care at 11 or 10.30, then we play outdoors for some time before arriving. ... Then it is easy for him, as he has learned a regular rhythm, only the locations change. (Hanna, mother)

For Oliver, the flow of daily routines and activities (meals, sleep and outings) is regular from day to day, whatever the location of each activity (home or ECEC). Learning to follow regular routines most probably makes daily life more familiar and predictable for him, regardless of his varying ECEC schedules.

Some of the interviewees also described how they help young children understand the flow of daily life by explaining upcoming events to them. Leena described such practices as commonly used in her ECEC setting.

In the hallway we have a kind of clock with pictures of the daily routines and activities, and children often have a look at it to see when their mum is coming to pick them up. We then explain to the children, when their mum is coming. (Leena, educator)

According to Leena, both pictures and verbal explanations are used to explain the daily events in ECEC and the timing of their departure to young children. This practice is also likely to make daily life more predictable for young children.

Furthermore, improving a child's familiarity with daily life was sometimes achieved by adjusting ECEC schedules to support the child's most important social relations in ECEC, as described by Susanna.

I know that Niklas will be picked up at seven (p.m.), so I always try to bring him (her son Eemil) a bit earlier so that they have a little time together. (Susanna, mother)

By bringing Eemil to ECEC earlier than her night shift would strictly require, Susanna enables him to meet his friend Niklas. Although she was the only one of the interviewees to describe a practice of this kind, it seems to be a noteworthy way of enhancing the familiarity of a child's social environment in ECEC.

## **DISCUSSION**

In Finland, young children whose parents work nonstandard hours commonly attend publicly provided flexibly-scheduled ECEC. However, we know very little about these children's daily lives, particularly those of the youngest children. The aim of this study was to contribute to filling this research gap by a qualitative analysis of perceptions on one- to three-year-old children's experiences and child-responsive practices related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC given by mothers and educators in ethnography-based interviews.

The participating mothers and educators described young children as experiencing both undesirable and desirable feelings related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC. Undesirable feelings, such as tiredness, stress, confusion and uncertainty, were mainly related to ECEC schedules that conflicted with young children's daily rhythms and with their needs for rest, sleep and stable social relations in ECEC. These findings are in line with earlier reports on stress related to long hours (Vermeer and Van IJzendoorn 2006), unstable daily programmes and varying social relations in day care (De Schipper et al. 2003). Generally, the undesirable feelings and associated behavioural challenges described by the interviewees point to difficulties hindering the development of young children's belonging, that is, their membership and sense of belonging (see Salonen et al. 2016).

Importantly, flexibly-scheduled ECEC was also perceived by several of the interviewees to have a highly positive side. In some cases, this form of ECEC entailed schedules that were well suited to young children's daily rhythms, and thus resulted in the children experiencing feelings of ease and comfort. Furthermore, nonstandard schedules were not necessarily perceived as confusing, but rather, once these young children had got used to their individual schedules, as a familiar and understandable fact of life. Moreover, young children were also described as getting used to unpredictable social encounters in ECEC and even becoming more trusting of unfamiliar educators. Such a positive comment by two of the educators on the varying social environment in ECEC was rather unexpected.

The multifaceted nature of flexibly-scheduled ECEC was most evident in talk about evenings and nights. Young children were found to experience more tiredness-related challenges during evenings in ECEC and as late arrivals staying overnight. Interestingly, however, evenings and nights in ECEC were also viewed in a very positive light: as the number of children in a day care centre tends to be smaller at these times, young children seemed to enjoy the special attention they received from their educators and somewhat greater freedom of choice. These ideas accord with the findings by Statham and Mooney (2003) that greater flexibility in routines characterises childcare given during nonstandard hours. Such features of ECEC may support children's wellbeing through the enhanced possibilities they present for negotiating and constructing their belonging (see Salonen et al. 2016). All in all, the conflicting views on ECEC implemented during evenings and nights show that young children's experiences of flexibly-scheduled ECEC are influenced by both the timing and other features of ECEC. The essential question seems to be whether the ECEC provision during a certain time of a day is suited to young children's daily rhythms, needs and preferences.

In addition to reflecting on young children's experiences, the mothers and the educators described various child-responsive practices in family life and ECEC scheduled according to

parental nonstandard working hours. These practices enabled the coordination and adjustment of daily schedules and activities both at home and in ECEC, thereby enhancing a predictable, understandable flow of daily life that accommodates to young children's daily rhythms and social needs. Overall, the ideas presented by the interviewees have the following pedagogical implications: when organizing family life and ECEC according to parental nonstandard work schedules, careful attention should be paid to 1) fulfilling a young child's needs for sleep and rest, 2) maintaining predictable routines at home and in ECEC, and 3) supporting the safety and continuity of the social relations that exist between a young child and his/her family members, educators and peers. At the level of policy making, resources should be directed to the provision of flexibly-scheduled ECEC of high quality. Moreover, account should be taken of the need for flexibility in the work schedules of parents with young children.

This study has two main limitations. First, the number of participants was very small, and therefore the findings should be interpreted with caution. Second, young children's experiences were studied through mothers' and educators' perceptions. Although observations of individual children's expressions were taken into account in the interview discussions, the data did not include the voices of the young children themselves. Moreover, the mothers' and educators' perceptions are likely to have been influenced by the widely-held assumption that parental nonstandard work and flexibly-scheduled ECEC have a negative impact on young children's wellbeing.

In view of the above-mentioned limitations, further research is needed to deepen our knowledge of young children's daily lives in the context of flexibly-scheduled ECEC. The conflicting viewpoints on the effects of evening ECEC especially call for observational research in natural evening ECEC settings. Most importantly, research based on sensitive observation of young children's own responses to their ECEC environments is needed to understand their experienced wellbeing in flexibly-scheduled ECEC. Such research could further clarify the

relationship between ECEC practices and child outcomes and thereby help in defining high quality in the domain of flexibly-scheduled ECEC.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study provided important insights into the daily lives of young children attending flexibly-scheduled ECEC. Through the lenses of mothers and educators, nonstandard schedules appeared as a multifaceted phenomenon, one that not only presents considerable challenges but also has possible benefits for young children. To realize these benefits, the highest priority needs to be given to the youngest children's needs and preferences when arranging family life and ECEC according to parental nonstandard work schedules.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

#### **Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest**

The study was funded by the Academy of Finland (grant number 251410) and Emil Aaltonen Foundation (grant number 160243 N1).

#### **Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals**

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the principles of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

#### **Informed consent**

Informed consent was obtained from all the individuals participating in the interviews.

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**Table 1.** Information on the children in the study: sex, age, family structure, and ECEC schedule

| Focus child | Child sex | Child age at<br>initial data<br>collection | Family structure | Child's ECEC weekly schedule <sup>1</sup> |
|-------------|-----------|--|------------------|---|
| Emma**      | Girl      | 1,5 years                                  | Single-mother    | Irregular shifts (35–75 hours per week)   |
| Sofia*      | Girl      | 1,5 years                                  | Two-parent       | Irregular shifts (29–47 hours per week)   |
| Noora**     | Girl      | 1,5 years                                  | Two-parent       | Irregular shifts (13–33 hours per week)   |
| Jenni**     | Girl      | 2 years                                    | Two-parent       | Irregular shifts (43–47 hours per week)   |
| Jasper*     | Boy       | 2 years                                    | Two-parent       | Irregular shifts (25–40 hours per week)   |
| Oliver**    | Boy       | 2 years                                    | Two-parent       | Irregular shifts (35–41 hours per week)   |
| Niklas*     | Boy       | 2,5 years                                  | Single-mother    | Regular shifts (59 hours per week)        |
| Eemil**     | Boy       | 2,5 years                                  | Single-mother    | Irregular shifts (36–76 hours per week)   |

**Notes:** <sup>1</sup> Irregular shifts = two or three irregularly scheduled and changing shifts varying in length that could include standard daytime hours, evenings, nights or weekends; Regular shifts with a fixed weekly schedule;

\* Discussed only in educator interviews; \*\* Discussed in both mother and educator interviews

**Table 2.** Young children’s experiences evident in flexibly-scheduled ECEC, as reported by mothers and educators

| Main categories of children’s experiences   | Aspects of flexibly-scheduled ECEC that produced different feelings  | Children’s expressed feelings  |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Tiredness and associated feelings related to ECEC schedules unsuited to young children’s daily rhythms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transitions between home and ECEC just before or during sleep time</li> <li>• Long hours at ECEC</li> <li>• ECEC during evenings</li> <li>• Morning ECEC, after evening ECEC</li> <li>• ECEC for several nights in a row</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tiredness</li> <li>• Dislike</li> <li>• Separation anxiety</li> <li>• Irritation</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Strain</li> <li>• Longing</li> <li>• Distress</li> <li>• Exhaustion</li> </ul> |
| 2. Ease and comfort related to ECEC schedules suited to young children’s daily rhythms                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transitions between home and ECEC well before sleep time or after sleep time</li> <li>• Reasonable or short hours in ECEC</li> <li>• Leisurely mornings at home prior to evening shifts at ECEC</li> </ul>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ease</li> <li>• Comfort</li> </ul>  |
| 3. Satisfaction, enjoyment and joy related to features of ECEC characteristic of evenings and weekends    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social interactions during evenings and weekends at ECEC</li> <li>• Activities during evenings and weekends at ECEC</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satisfaction</li> <li>• Enjoyment</li> <li>• Joy</li> </ul>   |
| 4. Confusion, uncertainty and distress related to the variability of daily life                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in the ECEC schedules</li> <li>• Unpredictable social encounters at ECEC</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Uncertainty</li> <li>• Distress</li> </ul>   |
| 5. Familiarity, understanding and trustfulness in relation to the variability of daily life               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in the ECEC schedules</li> <li>• Unpredictable social encounters at ECEC</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Familiarity</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Trustfulness</li> </ul>   |

**Table 3.** Child-responsive practices related to flexibly-scheduled ECEC, reported by mothers and educators

| Main categories of child-responsive practices | Specific sub-categories of practice   |
|---|---|
| 1. Managing tiredness-related challenges      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting ECEC schedules to respond to children's daily rhythms or their needs for sleep and rest</li> <li>• Adjusting daily activities at home and ECEC to children's needs for sleep and rest</li> <li>• Giving tired children special attention and physical closeness</li> </ul> |
| 2. Enhancing familiarity and predictability   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining regular routines at home and in ECEC</li> <li>• Explaining upcoming events to children</li> <li>• Adjusting ECEC schedules to support a child's most important social relationships in ECEC</li> </ul>   |