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Author's Grandchildren

Goals for the Decade of Childhood 2012–2022 Based on Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood: a Finnish perspective

By Lea Pulkkinen

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SUMMARY

The Association for Childhood Education International (www.ACEI.org), the mission of which is to promote and support the optimal education, development, and well-being of children worldwide, organized the Global Summit on Childhood in Washington, D.C., USA from 28 – 31 March, 2012, along with a number of other organizations such as the Alliance for Childhood. During the Global Summit on Childhood, ACEI and the Alliance for Childhood launched the Decade for Childhood, a 10-year initiative that provides opportunities for individuals and organizations to disseminate knowledge, consider best policies and practices, and support a global conversation about childhood. At the launch event, Lea Pulkkinen, Professor Emerita at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, delivered the following presentation:

The organizers of the Global Summit on Childhood formulated Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood as basic requirements for children's growth. The pillars can be used to analyse the quality of childhood in our homes and in our nations, and to guide policies and practices related to the experience of childhood.

At the Special Evening Event held to launch the Decade for Childhood 2012–2022, I illustrated, pillar by pillar, a few major points about childhood nowadays and also touched on issues which erode childhood. I took my examples from the Finnish culture for three reasons: firstly, Finnish culture is the one which I know best; secondly, I have studied the development of Finnish children from the time that they were eight years old up to middle age, and this has opened my eyes to what is important in the quality of childhood for a child's future. Thirdly, interest in the Finnish approach to education and child-rearing has increased in many parts of the world due to the results Finnish students have achieved in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which have shown that for the past decade 15-year-old Finnish students have been among the highest-performing students of all the 34 OECD countries.

To people who say that Finland, with its population of 5.5 million people, is too small to serve as a model, I respond in the same way as Pasi Sahlberg (2011), the author of a recent book "Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?" – who pointed out that about 30 U.S. states have a population close to or less than that of Finland.

Delegates from different countries have visited Finland to see the Finnish school system. Less attention has been paid to the impact of the quality of their entire childhood on students' success

Delegates from different countries have visited Finland to see the Finnish school system. Less attention has been paid to the impact of the quality of their entire childhood on students' success. In Finland, children start their nine-year basic schooling in the autumn of the year in which they turn seven years of age. This is the highest school starting age in the OECD countries. From the point of view of brain development, age seven is the proper age to start teacher-directed learning. At age six there is an optional pre-primary school year, which most families make use of. Before that, children are in day care or at home. We do not speak about preschool, we speak about day care until age 6. Let us start with the first pillar.

1. Safe places to live and learn, and access to health care, adequate clothing and nutritious food

During the Decade for Childhood, access to health care, good nutrition, and safe places to live should be made available to children all over the world. But public services are not enough; we also need to strengthen parents' awareness of their responsibility to provide their children with these things.

Of the many influences that affect a new life, some of the most far-reaching happen during the nine months before birth. In Finland, free maternity care has been well-organized for more than 60 years. Expectant mothers are expected to contact a maternity clinic by the end of the second month of pregnancy. A material incentive to do so is a maternity grant, which can be provided in the form of either a cash benefit or a maternity package including a full set of baby clothes with the package itself serving as the baby's bed. Infant mortality in Finland is very low, one third of that in the USA.

Responsibility for the healthcare of the newborn baby moves to the child welfare clinic, where a public health nurse and a doctor provide free services to children under school age and their families. At the clinic they receive health check-ups, vaccinations, and general advice on health issues.

In schools, the school nurses offer check-ups and health care plans. In 1948 Finland was the first country in the world to start serving free school meals.

In spite of the good health care services, there are issues that erode childhood in Finland; one is the increase in the number of cases of foetal alcohol syndrome in newborns due to the mother's drinking, and another is children's need for foster care due to problems of parenting such as alcoholism and child neglect, or to children's behavioural problems. Although the increasing need for foster care reflects a new legislation and a lowered threshold to intervene the family life, I also see these trends in parents' behaviour as a consequence of the spreading individualism and selfishness typical of current western ideology.

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2. Strong families and consistent, loving caregivers

During the Decade for Childhood, the value of the family should be emphasized and new means of supporting ties between couples should be found

The role of the father has changed radically in Finland over the past fifty years. Fathers used to be authoritarian and distant. Nowadays men participate actively in their children's lives. The father is usually present at the baby's birth and takes his paternity allowance of two weeks leave after the baby is born. Fathers share child care, domestic chores, and related activities. In spite of these developments, the divorce rate is high in Finland, as it is in many western countries. In a Unicef (2007) study, Finnish teenagers were ranked high in material well-being and health and safety, but in family and peer relationships were ranked at only 17 among 21 OECD countries. The reasons for this low ranking were the high percentage of young people living in single-parent family structures and step families, and the fact that Finland had the lowest percentage of teenagers whose parents eat their main meal with them around a table several times a week.

During the Decade for Childhood, the value of the family should be emphasized and new

means of supporting ties between couples should be found. Parents should be made more aware of the importance of simple things such as having family meals together and being mindful and alert – being present for their children with an awareness of what is going on in their lives right now. Research shows that having common meals at home is associated with children having a wider vocabulary and greater success at school, lower emotional problems such as depression, and lower use of alcohol and other drugs.

3. Social interactions and friendships

During the Decade for Childhood, effective interventions, such as the KiVa anti-bullying programme developed in Finland (Kärnä et al., 2011), should be implemented to eliminate bullying from schools.

As children begin to move away from parental influence, they benefit from a variety of activities with peers. Through these activities they develop the skills needed for sociability and intimacy, they develop relationships, and they gain a sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, bullying other children has become a big problem in schools in Finland, as elsewhere. Bullying causes high developmental risks not only for the bullies but also for their victims, who may suffer long-lasting depression.

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4. Creative play and physical activity

Play is children's way of expanding their knowledge of the physical world, their ability to communicate with peers, their understanding of themselves and others, and their imagination

Play is children's way of expanding their knowledge of the physical world, their ability to communicate with peers, their understanding of themselves and others, and their imagination. In Finnish early education, up to the age of seven, creative play and physical activity have traditionally occupied most of children's time. Parents and other educators provide time, places and simple toys to play with indoors and outdoors.

Physical activity is necessary for all kinds of development. Dr. Sally Goddard Blythe (2012) mentions in *Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe 2012* that there is "a growing body of evidence which indicates that an increasing number of children are entering formal education lacking the physical skills which are necessary to support all aspects of formal education. These children are at risk of under-achieving and/or developing various social or behavioural problems unless this immaturity is recognized and addressed".

During the Decade for Childhood, more time should be provided for creative play and physical activity

In countries where formal teaching in pre-schools starts at the age of 3 to 5, the role of creative play and physical activity is often reduced to a minimum. During the **Decade for Childhood**, more time should be provided for creative play and physical activity. More attention should also be paid to the fact that during their childhood, many children spend more time watching TV and other screens than they spend at school. Dr. Aric Sigman (2012) argues in his review of research findings that the early age at which children start watching screen media and the high number of daily hours they watch have negative effects on both their physical health and their psychological well-being, irrespective of the 'quality' of the screen material.

5. Appreciation and stewardship of the natural environment

During the Decade for Childhood, everything possible should be done to protect our earth and nature from human devastation and, consequently, children's health from environmental threats, and to increase children's access to the natural environment

Human beings are part of nature. The sense of belonging to nature and its appreciation are strengthened in children and adults who can spend time in and play and exercise in the natural environment.

Unfortunately, there is a growing concern in many countries about the effects of environmental threats on children's health. Peter van den Hazel (2012) remarks that the effects of environmental threats may start during pregnancy and that the effects of things such as toxicants and radiation may be cumulative. The main risks are inadequate access to potable water, poor hygiene and sanitation, air pollution, chemical hazards, injuries and accidents, and emerging global issues such as climate change.

During the **Decade for Childhood**, everything possible should be done to protect our earth and nature from human devastation and, consequently, children's health from environmental threats, and to increase children's access to the natural environment.

6. Creative expression through music, dance, drama, and the other arts

Participation in music and other arts clubs has positive effects on children's success at school and on their study skills such as concentration, and it improves their social skills, their ability to act cooperatively with other children

Schools are responsible for the transmission of culture. That culture is, however, too often understood only as knowledge to be transmitted. Arts belong to culture. Participation in

music and other arts clubs has positive effects on children's success at school and on their study skills such as concentration, and it improves their social skills, their ability to act cooperatively with other children. These results are based on a three-year experiment which I have conducted in seven schools (Pulkkinen, 2012).

During the Decade for Childhood, it is important to strengthen the culture of artistic self-expression in schools

During the **Decade for Childhood**, it is important to strengthen the culture of artistic self-expression in schools. Nowadays in homes in Finland and elsewhere, children have fewer and fewer opportunities to learn self-expression through the arts and manual activities such as handicrafts. Urbanization, ready-made products in shops, the parents' white collar professions and computer-based skills do not offer children models of creative expression. Kindergartens and schools have a special duty in this respect.

7. Education that develops the full capacities of the child – cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and ethical

Finnish children in day care enjoy their early education, the goals of which have been defined in our legislation. I was an expert member of the parliamentary Committee for Educational Goals in Day Care (1980) which 30 years ago set these goals. The committee analyzed the educational objectives of physical, social, emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, ethical, and religious education, taking into consideration the care and educational environments, the quality of care and education, and the child's own activity and growth, as illustrated by the "House of objectives" (Figure 1). It is based on the image of the child, society, and culture. It was our belief that in order to foster holistic growth in children and to support the child's opportunities to reach his or her unique potentials as an individual attention should be paid to educational conditions rather than to standardized characteristics and a set of skills which children are required to master.

The central aim of Finnish education is the development of each child as a thinking, active, creative person, not the attainment of higher test scores

In school, Finnish educators agree that every child has the right to get personalized support provided early on by trained professionals as part of normal schooling (Sahlberg, 2011). In school, there is no tracking by ability. In each school well-trained teachers are given great freedom in deciding what and how to teach. The central aim of Finnish education is the development of each child as a thinking, active, creative person, not the attainment of higher test scores. Finnish educators take care not to hold students back or label them as "failing", since this would lead to lower student motivation and failure, and increase social inequality. Physical punishment was forbidden at school in Finland by law a hundred years ago, in 1914, and in the home 30 years ago, in 1984. Education in Finland is tuition-free for everyone up to the level of their doctoral dissertation.

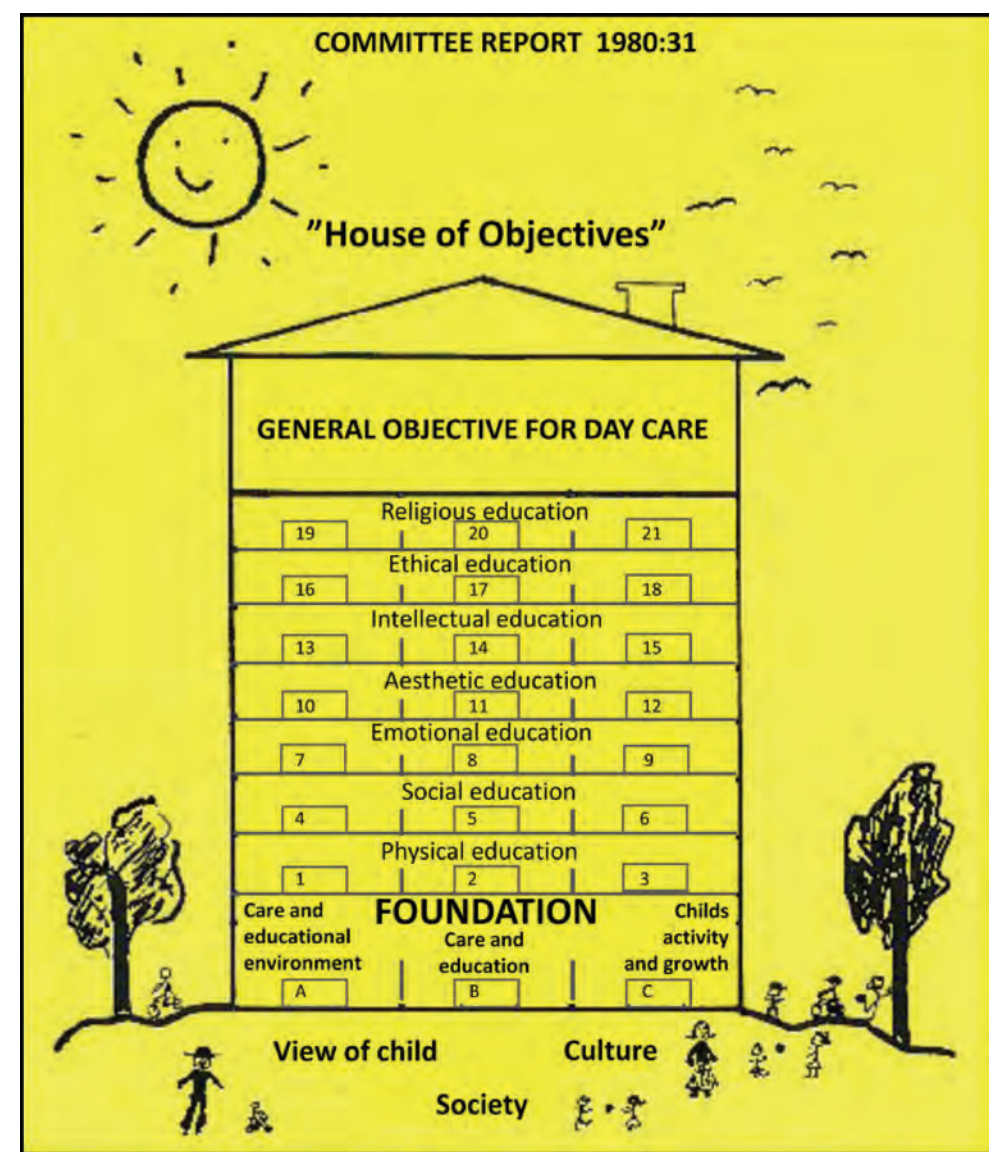


Figure 1. Objectives for day care in Finland. Amendments in day care legislation (1983) were based on the Committee Report (1980).

During the **Decade for Childhood**, a reassessment of the present Anglo-Saxon model may be needed; it promotes standardized testing as the most reliable measure of success for students, teachers, and schools; standardization of the curriculum; and test-based accountability such as merit pay for high scores, closing schools with low scores, and firing educators for low scores. In Finland, we try to stand up for our educational philosophy and resist pressure for standardization and test-based accountability.

8. Supportive, nurturing, child-friendly communities

During the Decade for Childhood, an important issue to be discussed in Finland and elsewhere is how to connect the science of child development to public policy, and how to promote supportive, nurturing, and child-friendly communities through policy making

Finnish day care centres and schools are carefully designed to meet the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of children. Unfortunately, the tendency has spread into Finland of calculating the short-term cost-effectiveness of education. This has resulted in larger groups of children in day care and larger schools, and cuts in schools' resources have been made. Policy changes are being made irrespective of the research results, which show the effects that these changes have on children.

During the **Decade for Childhood**, an important issue to be discussed in Finland and elsewhere is how to connect the science of child development to public policy, and how to promote supportive, nurturing, and child-friendly communities through policy making.

9. Growing independence and decision making

Growing independence and decision making may take place in many ways. Figure 2 illustrates developmental paths from age 8 to adulthood based on my longitudinal study (Pulkkinen, in press). They are statistical trends; individuals may take other paths due to the personal choices they make.

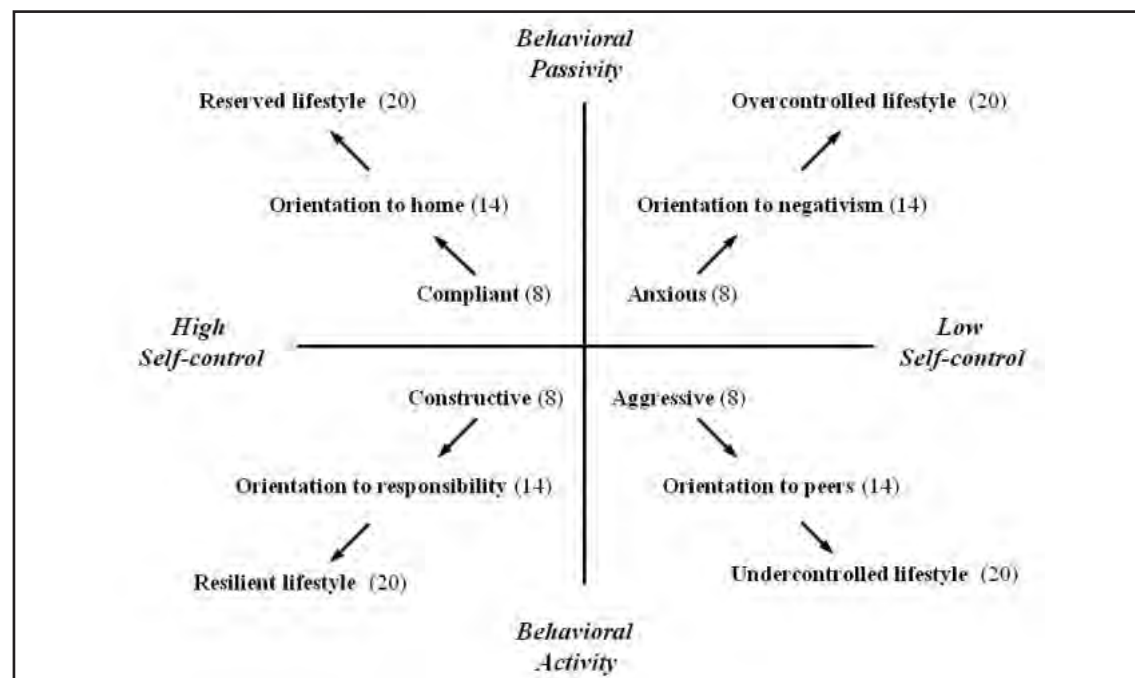


Figure 2. Paths from childhood to adulthood based on a longitudinal study.

One path began with characteristically aggressive behaviour at age 8. It tended to lead to a strong peer orientation in adolescence including always being on the go, hanging around in the streets and the early onset of smoking and drinking, and to an "under-controlled" lifestyle in early adulthood.

Another path began with constructive, reasonable behavior at age 8. It tended to lead to an orientation of taking responsibility for school work and other activities in adolescence and a resilient lifestyle in early adulthood characterized by optimism about and plans for the future, continuing education, and an interest in societal matters.

The other two paths depict more passive behaviors. One of them starts from anxiety, which tends to lead to an overcontrolled lifestyle including anxiety, low self-confidence, sense of alienation from society, and inclination to depressive symptoms. The other starts from compliance, which tends to lead to a reserved lifestyle including abstinence, withdrawal from peer contacts, and home-oriented activities (Pulkkinen, 1982).

The paths on the left side of the picture have high self-control (also called self-regulation) as a common underlying characteristic. High self-control is promoted by child-centred parenting. By this I mean that the parents have a sustained interest in the child's activities, and provide the child with trust and warmth. They advise the child and consider his or her opinions. This encourages the step by step development of independence and responsible decision making.

During the Decade for Childhood, support for parenting should be offered in various ways. One of these ways is the dissemination of knowledge based on research on child development and factors that affect it.

The paths on the right which share low self-control as a common characteristic were promoted by parent-centred parenting. Parent-centred parenting means that the parents deal with the child in a less considerate or consistent way, based more on their own moods than on the child's needs. This may mean that they are indifferent to the child's activities and are inconsistent, or authoritarian as parents. The child is left emotionally alone. Independence develops, but responsibility in decision making may not develop adequately. During the **Decade for Childhood**, support for parenting should be offered in various ways. One of these ways is the dissemination of knowledge based on research on child development and factors that affect it.

10. Children and young people participating in community life

When we speak about the quality of childhood, we often look at childhood through adults' lenses without listening to the voices of children. As the organizers of this meeting have written on their internet home page, children can offer critical insights that support societal development.

Childhood is a unique stage of its own in human development, as is old age

Another potential bias when speaking about the quality of childhood is assessing childhood from a utilitarian perspective. By this I mean regarding childhood as a preparatory stage for moving on to school and from there to a productive and profitable adulthood. Childhood is a unique stage of its own in human development, as is old age.

During the Decade for Childhood, active discussion should be encouraged on the image we hold of the child

During the **Decade for Childhood**, active discussion should be encouraged on the image we hold of the child. The image of the child might include a conception of the child's inner potential to grow, learn and communicate; the child's agency over his or her own life instead of being seen as an object to be shaped; and the need for sensitive adults to help the child unfold his or her uniqueness.



IN CONCLUSION

The process needed for improvement in the quality of childhood includes various strategies, as Michiel Matthes (2012) has described them. He says that we need to increase awareness of problems, establish organizations which highlight children's rights and perspectives, work together professionally, develop action models to get the general public, politicians and media involved, and work on the national and international level.

I congratulate the organizers on their child-centered activities and wish the Decade for Childhood 2012 to 2022 every success.

Author's Note

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Lea Pulkkinen

Lea Pulkkinen, Professor Emerita of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland (1972 – 2005) was the Director of the Programme on Human Development and Its Risk Factors, approved as the Finnish Centre of Excellence from 1997 to 2005, and President of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD) from 1991 to 1996. She has conducted a longitudinal study on social development from 1968 to the present, has collaborated in a longitudinal twin study since 1991, and organized a three-year school experiment for improving the educational offering of schools in the 2000s. In the applied field, she has been interested in how results of longitudinal studies can be utilized to improve the quality of childhood. She has about 450 publications. She received the Finnish State Award for her life-time dissemination of knowledge in 2011, the Finnish Science Award in 2001, the Aristotle Prize from the European Federation of Psychologists' Association (EFPA), and the Distinguished Scientific Contributions to the Child Development Award from the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) in the United States in 2005.

(home page: <http://users.jyu.fi/~leapulkk>)

Footnote:

In Finland, Unified nine-year Comprehensive Basic School starts in the autumn of the year in which the child turns seven years of age. After it, at age 16, there is a choice to apply to continue studies either in upper general secondary school or upper vocational secondary school. Thereafter, studies can be continued in a university or polytechnic independent of the type of secondary school (Sahlberg, 2011, a figure, p. 40). Sahlberg (2011, p. 39) notes that "unlike many other contemporary systems of education, the Finnish system has not been infected by market-based competition and high-stakes testing policies."