Space for toddlers in the guidelines and curricula for early childhood education and care in Finland

Niina Rutanen

Childhood 2011 18: 526 originally published online 11 August 2011
DOI: 10.1177/0907568211399366

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://chd.sagepub.com/content/18/4/526

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Norwegian Centre for Child Research

Additional services and information for Childhood can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://chd.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://chd.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://chd.sagepub.com/content/18/4/526.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Nov 18, 2011

OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 11, 2011

What is This?
Space for toddlers in the guidelines and curricula for early childhood education and care in Finland

Niina Rutanen
University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract
In Finland, the policies and practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) have been characterized by a division into practices and forms of care for children under and over 3 years old. This study analyses the construction of space in the national and local level curricula for the very youngest children. These documents both present ‘child’s best interests’ as age-related, and generalize and distinguish the needs and abilities of the ‘younger’ and the ‘older’ children. At the local level, the space offered for the youngest children is linked to the emphasis on the daycare group as a community of social actors; the youngest ones are seen as inexperienced newcomers, faced with adaptation to the group and its rules.

Keywords
Cultural construction of childhood, curriculum, early childhood education and care, space/place, toddlers

As public spaces for education and care, daycare centres are constructed through particular political and cultural understandings of the child and ‘good’ childhood (Brembeck et al., 2004; James and James, 2008; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003; Wagner and Einarsdottir, 2008). In early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland, developmental psychology has provided a strong theoretical basis for developing the practice. The focus on children’s well-being from the developmental perspective is in line with the generational ordering of relations that set adults and children in different positions in society (Alanen, 2001; see also Närvänen and Näsman, 2007). Furthermore, in modern societies the childhood institutions, such as daycare and school, are largely based on the division of children into different groups by age. Chronological age, however, is not the only criterion; children need to fulfil various preconditions related to age-appropriate skills and competences (Hungerland, 2003, cited in Kelle, 2010: 10).

Corresponding author:
Niina Rutanen, University of Tampere, School of Education, Åkerlundinkatu 5, 33014 Tampere, Finland. Email: niina.rutanen@uta.fi
The observations of the institutionalization and individualization of European childhoods (Brembeck et al., 2004) are intriguing in relation to spaces and places of children under 3. At this age, children’s everyday life represents a range of tensions between institutional and domestic care and control, protection and promotion of independence as well as children’s dependence on adult care. Various conflicting policies and discourses direct the practices of care and education for children under 3. Thus, this study focuses on the space offered for toddlers by investigating whether age is used as a category to construct differences in the ‘best interests of the child’ in the guiding documents for ECEC. Furthermore, how are the ideals and notions translated and restructured from the global level to curricula in local practice?

**Toddlers and ‘under-3s’**

‘Age’ can be defined as the ‘registering of time passing in an individual’s life’ (James et al., 1998: 70). In addition to chronological age, age can be defined in social or cultural terms: it is a construct and a cultural tool to ‘mark’ people and set them into different power positions. Social age refers to the life stages or social position of a group or individual in society; it includes role expectations that are revealed when the person does something at the ‘wrong age’ (Rantamaa, 2005: 58–60; see also Solberg, 2008). Age can be used as a social category, and ‘in virtue of their [people’s] category membership’ inferences are made from the attributes of individuals to the attributes of the rest of the category (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 116; emphasis is original). Instead of homogeneous entities, social categories are ‘fuzzy sets’, where there are many differences between members (Cantor and Mischel, 1977, 1979, cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 199).

Chronological age is used as a guideline in legislation and policies for childhood services. In the social policy of OECD countries, 3 years of age is constructed as a specific transitory period, underlined by the statistics and legislation in social policy and institutional care (e.g. in Finland, the right to home care allowances). In practice, daycare centres are attended mainly by groups under 3 and 3- to 5-year-olds, including different child–caregiver ratios (Bennett, 2008). The focus here is on children under 3, following this explicit division in the practice. In developmental psychology, the term ‘toddler’ refers to motor skills around 12 months (Cole and Cole, 1996: 226). Depending on the source, ‘toddler’ is applied to children from 12 to 24 months or beyond, until ‘early childhood’ (2.5–6 years). Here, toddlerhood is seen as an age-related life phase and as a social category: institutions also include age-specific norms that refer to this phase in question (Närvänen and Näsman, 2007: 229; see also Thorne, 2004).

**Space for toddlers**

Space and place are applied as theoretical tools to investigate both childhood institutions and children’s agency within the constraints of the institutional practices (Gallacher, 2005; Hancock and Gillen, 2007; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Olwig and Gulløv, 2003). Here, drawing on critical geography and following Henri Lefebvre’s work (2004 [1974]), the daycare institution is approached taking the ‘representations of space’ as the starting point for the analysis of the space assigned to the children. The
policy documents, the guidelines and the local, unit and child-specific curricula are seen as producing written representations of space for ECEC. By describing the values, the aims and giving examples for practice, they draw a rough map, ‘a road plan’, for the spatio-temporal practices. This is conceptualized space, ‘the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers. . . . Conceptions of space tend . . . towards a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs’ (Lefebvre, 2004: 38–9).

As the ‘best interests of the child’ is explicitly defined as a guiding value for practice, it is selected as a lens through which to scrutinize the descriptions of ideals and aims. Following Kjørholt (2008: 30), it ‘involves normative and ethical assessments, anchored in cultural contexts and notions of (good) childhood and quality of life’. Instead of the legal use of the term, ‘best interests’ is here approached as a negotiable ideal with fuzzy boundaries; the applications and ‘translations’ of it into descriptions of practice are of interest here (Strandell, 2010; Therborn, 1993). In the discussion, I refer to children’s places as lived-through experiences and positions within the group of children and adults in daycare.

In summary, instead of focusing on absolute or physical space, this study focuses on the social and personal space produced in social relations. A dynamic interplay is assumed between the culturally constructed meanings, ideals and expectations of (good) toddlerhood within ECEC articulated in the written documents, the local level of practice and the toddlers’ construction of space (lived-through experiences).1

The Finnish context

In Finland, the basic legislation on ECEC was passed in 1973 (Laki lasten . . . 36/1973 [Act on Children’s Daycare]). Daycare has an institutional task that includes care, teaching and education aimed at promoting children’s balanced growth, development and learning (National Curriculum Guidelines, 2005).2 Recent decades have witnessed a shift from central governance by the state to decentralized guidance with information (see e.g. Strandell, 2010). The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (2005) provide a national tool, a ‘core plan’,3 for planning at the local levels. In addition to the national documents and legislation, the local policies, such as the general municipal strategies and plans, govern the implementation of the practices. Municipal-level and unit-specific curricula as well as child-specific plans are all being developed. The municipals are also obliged to create a child protection plan (Lastensuojelulaki, 417/2007 [Child Welfare Act]). It remains to be seen how these will resonate with ECEC policies in the long run.

Historically, the care for under- and over-3s has been separated into different institutions. In 1973 the division between nurseries and kindergartens was discarded, and both under-3s and 3- to 6-year-olds started to attend daycare centres or municipal family daycare (Onnismaa, 2010; Välimäki, 1998). In daycare centres today, children are often divided into groups following the difference in child–caregiver ratio for those under and over 3.

The majority of under-3s do not attend any organized form of full-day care outside the family, regardless of the child’s subjective right.4 In comparison to English-speaking OECD countries, Finland also offers highly subsidized out of home services for
under-3s, with parents usually paying around 10–15 percent of the costs (UNICEF, 2008). The age division, into children under and over 3, is also apparent in the financial incentives for home care allowances. The child is not entitled to home care allowances after the age of 3 unless there is a younger sibling at home (Laki lasten kotihoidon . . . 1128/1996 [Act on Child Home Care Allowance and Private Care Allowance]).

The analysis

Qualitative text analysis was applied to national and local documents on ECEC. The coding of the material was guided by the questions: is age discussed, how and in what context? Is there explicit reference to the ‘child’s best interests’ and/or needs? And further, with application of the discursive approach (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), how are the ‘best interests’ and needs constructed in relation to children’s age in the Finnish ECEC documents?

The documents are understood as actors, not only descriptions of pre-existing reality (Prior, 2004): they relate to and influence the production of both new documents and practices at large. As these documents included both explicit references to one another as well as indirect links, the idea of intertextuality fitted well with the analysis. Intertextuality refers to the interlinkedness of all the texts and meanings; each of them emerges and gains interpretation within the continuum of the texts (Wood and Kroger, 2000). Translation refers to the applications of the ideals from the national level to the documents close to practice. In this process they are restructured, reinterpreted and mixed with other sources of knowledge and experiences.

From global to local – presenting the material

The following documents were acquired for the analysis:

2. The Decision in Principle of the Council of State Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2002) = D2;
3. The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (2005) = D3; and, from one selected town:
4. The municipal curriculum = D4;
5. The unit-specific curriculum of one daycare centre = D5.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (D1) is de facto a very different document from the others included in the analysis. It applies a general language, with a vocabulary more reminiscent of legislation than policies in a special field like ECEC. Here, it offers a starting point to investigate the manifestations of the ‘child’s best interests’ as a value basis in the documents that approach the descriptions of the practices.

The Decision in Principle of the Council of State Concerning the National Policy Definition on Early Childhood Education and Care (2002) (D2) is stated to contain the main principles and developmental priorities for ECEC in Finland. It gives a basic definition, describes the existing service structure and makes proposals for action: the reform
of the legislation and the development of follow-up and evaluation for ECEC among other things. Legislation and principles from other fields, such as health care, are quoted to describe the legal landscape and state decisions constraining the training of professionals and the services.

In addition to the Decision in Principle (D2), *the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (2005)* (D3) takes the UN Convention (D1) together with the national legislation as a starting point. Its main audience is administrative personnel in municipalities and leaders and professionals in practices.

The curricula in different municipalities are diverse even though they all apply the national guidelines as a general background. In the *municipal curriculum* (D4) selected, a more practical content is provided in an attempt to clarify the local value basis and add information on how to pursue the national ideals and aims in practice. The documents (D3, D4) follow a similar structure in terms of topic headings: the only difference is in the order of the headings and in a special section on evaluation at the municipal level. The *unit-specific curriculum* (D5) selected also follows the same structure. However, the unit-specific curriculum addresses each topic, two to six pages, in fewer than 10 lines, often with concrete descriptions. As an exception, ‘values and strategy basis’ receive more attention. Parents and professionals in the daycare centre seem to be the main audience. Even within the same municipality, the form and content of the unit-specific curricula vary.

**Age and children’s best interests**

The documents include few explicit references to age in years. Most of the references are made in the UN Convention (D1) and in the Decision in Principle (D2) by describing the legal context. ‘Three years of age’ appears when the national legislation is clarified in relation to home care allowances (D2, 159–60), and when the age limit for ‘language immersion’ is set (D3, 1178–87). In the UN Convention, ‘age-related’ rights and needs are underlined (D1, 43). All the documents imply that children in daycare institutions differ in competences and participation rights as regards age, be it chronological or social age.

With the exception of the unit-specific curriculum (D5), ‘the child’s best interests’ appears explicitly in all the documents. This guiding principle, repeatedly mentioned in the UN Convention (D1), is to be applied to ECEC (D2, 207). In the National Guidelines, it appears in the description of the value basis (D3, 359), with regard to the educational partnership between parents and professionals (D3, 951–2) and when collaboration among different services in case of early intervention in risk situations is mentioned (D3, 301–6). In the municipal curriculum, it is referred to in the context of educational partnership, where ‘both parties should work and commit together to the child’s best interests and fulfilment of their rights’ (D4, 175–6).

A more discursively oriented analysis of the national (D2, D3) and the local (D4, D5) documents revealed a construction of age-related differences in children’s competence and needs and the ‘child’s best interests’ in relation to these differences. Three approaches were found: (1) age and level of development, (2) the younger/smaller and the older/bigger and (3) developing child/children.
Age and level of development

In the UN Convention (D1, 19) as well as in the national ECEC documents (D2, 227; D3, 370), ‘age and developmental level’ is given as a source of difference of opinions as well as the ways in which children’s opinions are to be consulted. Further, ‘level of development’, referring to the developmental age of the children, pervades all the documents until the unit level (D5, 37–8). The UN Convention requirement to provide direction for the child to exercise his/her right, ‘in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child’ (D1, Article 14), appears in the Finnish version as ‘consistent with the level of the child’s development’ (D1, 21, back translation into English; emphasis added). This requirement is also repeated at national level (D2, 209). At municipal level, this principle is set closer to practice, as one quality criterion is described as the child’s ‘opportunity to make choices, decisions and express wishes according to level of development in everyday situations in daycare’ (D4, 218–19).

The repeated occurrence of the ‘level of development’ underlines the professionals’ role in applying a developmental psychological perspective to acquire knowledge about children. In general, the literature on developmental psychology offers a variety of approaches to development, with different views on continuity, sources of development and individual differences (Cole and Cole, 1996), as well as critical reflections on ‘development’ (Burman, 2008). However, the ECEC documents leave unspecified the nature and assumptions of the developmental framework to be applied.

Without specifying the details of the approach, the requirement for a developmental perspective is explicit at national level (D3, 829–34), as well as at the municipal level. ‘Knowledge about the development of the child’ (D4, 183) is underlined when child-specific plans are laid out (see also Alasuutari and Karila, 2009). More precisely, the starting point for planning are the ‘challenges’ presented by ‘children’s development and age’ (D4, 241–2). Together with a developmental perspective, stages are mentioned. Expertise includes knowledge about stages, and play is described as one area of application (D3, 653–5). Knowledge about the stages is also noted together with an ‘ethical orientation’ as one core content area for ECEC (D3, 898–901).

As the documents apply both the singular and plural, child and children, the emphasis fluctuates from one child of an individual age and development-related needs to be discovered to a group of children of similar age and development-related needs. The unit-specific curriculum is clearest with regard to the latter formulation. In this case, children of the same age form a group with similar skills and learning, and, further, similar needs and participation rights. To summarize, professionals’ expertise is related to knowledge about development and the application of a developmental perspective to respond to these context-independent needs (see Woodhead, 2008).

The ‘younger/smaller’ and the ‘older/bigger’

In the second approach, a boundary is either set between the ‘younger’ and the ‘older’, or children are situated on a continuum from the youngest to the oldest. The ‘younger’ are different from the ‘older’ and, consequently, they also require different care, attention, education and teaching than children at the ‘older’ end.
This approach to constructing differences related to age is clear at the national level (D3) and almost identical in the municipal document (D4). Professionals’ role is to respond to age-related needs for care that *decrease* with age: ‘The younger the child is, the greater the extent to which interactions between the child and the educators take place in care situations. . . . The younger the child is, the more he needs to be cared for by adults’ (D3, 429–44). At the municipal level, the emphasis is slightly different: the adults’ role is to be more *sensitive* to the physical and psychological needs of the youngest ones (D4, 212, 213). Related to children’s need for more care, the Decision in Principle stresses that family daycare is often the option that parents would especially prefer for the ‘youngest’ or for children who need care during the evenings and/or nights (D2, 200).

In general, the National Guidelines (D3) describe the ‘child’s way of acting’ and ‘playful learning’ in broad terms, drawing on various discourses on childhood and children (Rautio, 2005; Strandell, forthcoming). The document presents an image of a *natural child* and emphasizes homogeneity among children. At the same time, some differences in relation to age are made explicit. The ‘young ones’ communicate differently from the ‘older ones’, who use spoken language. A ‘young child’ uses facial expressions, gestures and movements – and ‘needs an educator who is regularly nearby and knows their individual way of communicating’ (D3, 551–2). Similar vocabulary about the change in communication is applied in the municipal curriculum (D4, 271). It also clearly underlines the role of the ‘early experiences in interaction’ in the family and ‘other educators’ as a ‘basis for later learning of communication’ (D4, 265).

The National Guidelines also stress an age-related difference in play. ‘Very young’ children are described to move from play with adults and ‘older’ children and object manipulation to imaginary play (D3, 611–14). Following this, and depending on other factors (chronological age, playing skills, situation), the professional’s role changes from ‘participation to outside observation’ (D3, 631–5).

This categorization of the ‘younger’ vs the ‘older’ suggests that the ‘youngest’ in daycare are living an age-phase with similar experiences and needs. The documents include a construction of the ‘youngest’ children as a group and as a structural position in relation to the ‘older’ children in ECEC and adults; here, age is clearly used as a category for social ordering within the institutional practices. ‘Young’ children are living a phase that lays the foundations for learning and the later ‘daycare career’. This positions 1- to 2-year-olds as the ‘less’ experienced in daycare, regardless of their personal skills and experiences in the peer group. The needs of the ‘youngest’ are underlined, with reference to ‘basic needs’ and secure relationships (see Woodhead, 2008). The source of knowledge for the professionals moves from theories of development to more vaguely defined, culturally transmitted knowledge of the ‘younger’ and the ‘older’ in this institutional context. It is likely that a previous, historically and culturally shared construction of a division of skills and needs of under- and over-3s comes into play.

**Developing child/children**

Social distinctions among children are also constructed with oblique reference to age. The texts suggest that some children are learning and developing skills in somewhat
different positions than others. Children are moving towards a more experienced position on the basis of their development, learning and their presence in the group. The discourse on the developing child/children focuses on developing individuality, via two different approaches: developing individuality as independence and developing individuality as group membership.

**Developing individuality as independence**

This approach describes both the ideal state of the child and the changing child, referring to the positive outcomes of education (Woodhead, 2008). As a starting point, the general aim for all education is set out in the UN Convention ‘The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’ (D1, 42). In the Decision in Principle, the individual development is introduced in the preface: ‘It [ECEC] must provide all children with equal opportunities to develop according to their own capacities’ (D2, 99–101).

In the National Guidelines, the three educational goals described are ‘promotion of personal wellbeing, reinforcement of considerate behaviour and action towards others, gradual build-up of autonomy’ (D3, 383–6). In the more detailed description of these goals, the Finnish and the English versions differ considerably. In the Finnish version, childhood as being is more emphasized, without reference to adulthood: children are to take care of themselves and the people close to them according to their capacities, and they are to make decisions in relation to their lives. Not only are the learning goals described, but also how children should feel about this process: ‘[the] child may/is allowed to feel joy when s/he learns to take care of him/herself and trust her/his own know-how’ (D3, 398–404). Whereas in the English version, these descriptive sentences are summarized as children’s development into autonomous adults: ‘Gradual build-up of autonomy aims to help children grow up into adults who are able to take care of themselves and those closest to them and to make decisions and choices concerning their own life’ (D3, 398–404; in the English version, p. 40; emphasis added).

Further, in the curriculum guidelines independence appears under the topic of learning. Instead of describing subject areas, a concept of ‘orientation’ is used. This term is justified by the emphasis on learning as self-generated discoveries: the intention is that children ‘start to acquire tools and capabilities by means of which they are able to gradually increase their ability to examine, understand and experience a wide range of phenomena in the world around them’ (D3, 819–22). The role of the professionals is to create a learning environment, with content orientations, gradually moving towards the desired direction: ‘a broad spectrum of human understanding, knowledge and experience and related processes are gradually introduced to the child’ (D3, 915–18). This emphasis on the developing child is particularly clear in ‘natural sciences orientation’: ‘Causal relationships become familiar . . . which helps children gradually gain insights into natural phenomena and the factors influencing them’ (D3, 871–3; emphasis added), as well as an ‘aesthetic orientation’: ‘The child’s values, attitudes and views start to develop’ (D3, 889–91; emphasis added).

The professionals’ expertise includes knowledge and observations about the (individual) development of the child. These observations support the drafting of a child-specific plan on the basis of children’s needs (D3, 1004–11) (see Alasuutari and Karila, 2009). In the
municipal curriculum, the emphasis on professionals’ knowledge is slightly different, also noting ‘observations of the child as a member of the group’ (D4, 183–4).

Both in the national and the municipal curriculum, language is assigned a vital role in self-expression and cognitive growth: ‘It . . . enables the communication of meanings. As the child grows up, the function of language in supporting cognitive processes grows in importance in terms of problem solving, logical thinking and imagination’ (D3, 538–45, similarly in D4, 273). Both of the documents refer to ‘daily routines’ as a source for language learning for ‘young children’ (D3, 559); the municipal curriculum contextualizes the routines to ‘dressing, meal times and sleeping’ (D4, 268). In addition to spoken language, the emphasis on self-expression appears when art education is discussed: in relation to the development of ‘[mental] balance and self-expression’, a child finds a way to ‘express him/herself and his/her needs’ (D4, 314).

In the narrative of the documents, children develop from dependence on adults towards independence and autonomy as a result of ECEC. Individuality becomes observable in both increasing self-expression, autonomy and independence (not needing adults’ attention) and personal skills for learning.

**Developing individuality as group membership**

In the documents closer to actual practice (D4, D5), there is more emphasis on children as (developing) members of a group and children’s peer relations than at the national level (D2, D3). A particular version of the developing child is presented in the municipal curriculum. A child might be at the beginning of daycare attendance and the professionals should establish a rapport with the child and the family (D4, 179–84; also D4, 202–3). The development of the child refers to her/his becoming an active and accepted member of the group. The role of the professionals is to assist children when they ‘practise their interactional skills’ and support them to become accepted as members of their play group (D4, 204–6).

In the municipal curriculum, the communal nature of the (child) group and adults working with it is described in a variety of ways. Descriptions of both the arrangements and functions are given, as ‘The joint rules made together with the child group help children to understand how to act in a group’ (D4, 202), as well as the benefits and results for the child: ‘To be a member of a group . . . shapes her/his social intercourse and her/his self-knowledge develops in a positive direction’ (D4, 214–15). The planning is based on what the ‘children in the child group are learning and acquiring’ (D4, 242). The description fluctuates from a group doing, developing, learning, to children interacting, having needs and skills in the plural, into a child developing as a part of a group (D4, 253–5).

Following this emphasis on the (child) group and daycare as a community of social actors, the learning environment is also said to be planned and restructured on the basis of the ‘group’s age and developmental level’ (D5, 35–6), and the ‘needs of the (child) group’, yet still ‘considering children’s differences and their interests’ (D5, 88). In addition to the development of self-confidence, autonomy and creativity, emphasis is placed on social skills and behaviour in the group: ‘the aim is that the child practises and learns . . . to take others into account and collaborate with them, joint rules and good manners, tolerance and acceptance of differences’ (D5, 11–15). This emphasis on considerate behaviour is present in the National Guidelines, as one of the three goals (D3, 384).
However, the unit-level curriculum brings this communal aspect more clearly to the forefront in the context of the document as a whole.

Emphasis on the ‘practice and learning’ implies that children are acquiring social skills. In comparison to the national level (D3), the local documents underline that these skills are likely to be lacking or undeveloped when children begin daycare. A construction of the inexperienced and weak position of any newcomer in the group appears. However, the youngest ones entering the group are positioned as the most vulnerable, as their social skills are described to be developing and their membership in the group and knowledge of the rules are not yet established.

In summary, in the narrative of the documents, a good quality ECEC supports the emergence of an articulate child who is aware of the rules and knows how to work in a group. These observations are supported by Strandell’s (2010) analysis of Finnish policy. On the local level, however, the future-oriented perspective of ‘making children competent and flexible members of a globalized information society’ (Strandell, 2010: 179) is replaced with more of a here-and-now perspective. Importance is attached to the functioning of the group and success within the challenges the everyday presents.

Discussion

The ‘best interests of the child’ and children’s participation rights are interpreted differently in different contexts, as ‘there is no universal standard defining what constitutes children’s best interests’ (Kjørholt, 2008: 15–29). The analysis of Finnish ECEC documents supports this observation, as the national and the municipal curricula leave space for the units to interpret what the age-related needs and ‘best interests of the child’ are. The interpretation should be made as the texts construct a difference between younger and older children. Age is used for social distinction in all levels of planning. In practice, the historical, culturally shared construction of a division of skills and needs comes into play and enhances existing stereotypical images of what can be done, and how, with children under 3. The strong images of the physical and emotional dependence are at odds with the emphasis on autonomy, exploration and self-development, i.e. the constructs of the ‘modern child’ who is able and empowered to make choices for him/herself (Brembeck et al., 2004; Kjørholt, 2008; Onnismaa, 2010; Strandell, forthcoming). The natural synthesis will be that the ‘ideal/competent toddler’ is able to express needs for care with increased self-reflectivity and negotiation skills, following the developmental benefits and instruments provided during the ‘daycare career’ (see Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006: 138). In criticism of this, even if the developmental paradigm creates a normativity of the ‘right’ behaviour at a certain time, one may ask whether considering toddlers as a homogeneous category masks gender, ethnic or cultural dimensions or inequalities (Thorne, 2004; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006: 139).

Gulløv’s (2003: 33) observations of the Danish context are applicable to Finland:

The organisation of the pedagogical environment and the articulations of children’s needs reveal a perception of the child as vulnerable and psychologically attached to its parents. There exists . . . a cultural norm of the home as being the right place for small children, a perception that gives rise to the symbolic ambiguities that can be identified in the institutional arrangements.
The danger is that this leads to a narrowing of the discussions on placing young children in daycare on either justifications of the developmental benefits or emphasis of the role of the adult to provide parent-like security.

What can be said about the space for children after the analysis of the ‘representations of space’ in ECEC? ‘Representations of space’ (Lefebvre, 2004) focus on the ideals of how the relations between children and adults should be. From describing the aims, they move on to describe the (normal) child, and then to address the responsibilities of the different parties involved. More than physical, ECEC space is described in terms of actions and relations between people. Following this relationality, the space offered is not uniform; the ideal is a space that is porous – specialized, flexible and open to reflection and ready for changes on local levels. The emphasis is on individuality, but not at the expense of equality as a quality factor for care and education.

As the (chronological) age of children is not clearly stated, ‘young child’ seems to refer to the undefined, emerging position as a lived space of the child/children within the social space in the daycare. A ‘young child’ has not established her/his individual, subjective, personal place; s/he is slowly gaining lived-through experiences, encounters and emotions within the peer group and with the adults who, also with experience and more knowledge, get more familiar with the child. Her/his place, as a position in the group and in relation to the spatio-temporal structures of the daycare, is taking shape, whereas the more experienced ones already have a more established place within the boundaries expressed, for example, in local rules.

This study sheds light on the social and cultural construction of children’s age and the ‘best interests of the child’ with material that is limited to the contemporary Finnish context. It is appropriate to ask whether the focus on children under 3 creates an artificial boundary instead of revealing some of the dynamics of the social construction of childhood in general. The focus is justified by the legislation and historical background of Finnish daycare services, which originally emerged as assistance to families (Välimäki, 1998). Regardless of the changes in the university-based preschool teacher education and the developments in practices and childhood policies, children under 3 continue to be a group that is difficult to include in the discussions on children’s rights and responsibilities in general.

The documents describe childhood as ‘developmental childhood’ (Honig, 1999, cited in Kelle, 2010: 10). However, as they leave the definitions of ‘age-appropriate development’ relatively vague, they offer a flexible background for local and subjective interpretations of the competencies, skills and, relatedly, ‘child’s best interests’ and rights. The danger lies in the risk that the practices might be guided and justified by implicit assumptions of the clear-cut developmental differences between children under and over 3 years of age that the curricula seem to support. Further, it is also problematic if children are subjected to evaluation of skills and competences and interventions without wider contextual knowledge and critical discussion about the hidden assumptions and the particular theoretical approaches to development. On the basis of the analysis here, it would be important to introduce critical, multidisciplinary perspectives to the application of the curricula and discussions with the professionals in the daycare centres. In addition to the emphasis on age differences from a developmental perspective, contextual knowledge from the social studies of childhood is needed. At the moment the focus is more on
children’s developing competences and supporting these rather than on critical examination of the structures that construct, canalize and normalize ‘age-appropriate’ behaviour.

Acknowledgements

In addition to the anonymous reviewers, I am also grateful to Liisa Granbom-Herranen, Johanna Mykkänen, Raija Raittila and Mari Vuorisalo for helpful comments on the article.

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland, project ‘(In)visible Toddlerhood? Global and Local Constructions of Toddlers’ Places in Institutions 2010–2012’ (project No.133345).

Notes

1. These three levels follow Lefebvre’s (2004) categories: representations of space (conceived space), sociospatial practices (perceived space) and representational space (lived space).
2. The emphasis on equal access, good quality services regardless of location and individuality in attendance follow the ideals of Nordic welfare state politics (Onnismaa, 2010; Strandell, 2010; Wagner and Einarsdottir, 2008).
3. In the English version, the term ‘curriculum’ is used, with a clarification of the holistic nature of ECEC, as well as negotiations on the basis of planning (National Curriculum Guidelines, 2005: 40).
4. In OECD countries, almost 70 percent of 3- to 6-year-olds and 25 percent of under-3s attend out of home care (UNICEF, 2008). In Finland, the rate of access to regulated services was in 2007: 31 percent of 1- to 2-year-olds, 50 percent of 2- to 3-year-olds and 67 percent of 3- to 4-year-olds (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2008.) Almost all under 1-year-olds are cared for at home because of the paid maternity and parental leaves.
5. The code D1, etc. is used to refer to the individual documents. Where the documents are cited in the text, the numbers following the document code refer to the line numbers generated by Maxqda qualitative software. The analysis was applied to the Finnish documents. In presenting the data, the English versions of D1, D2 and D3 are used. If the translations differ in relevant aspects from the original, the version used is specified.
6. The daycare centre is participating in a more extensive research project.
7. In language immersion the language used is other than the children’s mother tongue.
8. The official translation into Finnish of one of the main sentences states that ‘The views of the child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and the level of development of the child’ (D1, p. 19, back translation into English by author). The original English version: ‘States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’ (UN Convention, 1989: Article 12).
9. The English version of the guidelines uses the term ‘maturity’ in line with the original UN Convention, whereas the Finnish version applies the phrase the ‘age and level of development’.
10. Sometimes ‘small’ or ‘young’ refer to all children attending daycare. Here, the context supports the interpretation that the youngest in the daycare centre was referred to.

References

Alasuutari M and Karila K (2009) Lapsuuden ja lapsen tulkinnat lapsikohtaisissa varhaiskasvatus-suunnitelmissa [The interpretation of child and childhood in individual educational plans]. In:
Alaan L and Karila K (eds) Lapsuus, lapsuuden instituutiot ja lasten toiminta [Childhood, Childhood Institutions and Children’s Action]. Tampere: Vastapaino, 70–89.


