What is Finnish ECEC?

Working in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland is interesting, fun, sometimes demanding, but also very rewarding. Finland offers personnel very good guidelines for early childhood education and care, tools for shaping the pedagogical activities specifically for your group of children and freedom to express yourself in your work. Those precious early years are very important in terms of child’s holistic development, growth, learning and future. Therefore, it truly matters how we communicate, observe, listen to, support, encourage and care for the children, as well as what kind of learning opportunities and environments we offer them.

The aim of early childhood education and care is to promote children's growth, development and learning as well as equality and equity among children. Early childhood education and care is an important part of the Finnish education system. Early childhood education and care in Finland follows certain curriculums, acts and regulations. The purpose of the National Core Curriculum is to create equal starting points for the growth, development and learning of the children participating in early childhood education and care. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for early childhood education and care plan consists of three levels. It comprises the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education, the Local Curricula for Early Childhood Education as well as children's Individual Early Childhood Education and Care plans. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
The curriculums and plans include several good practices, which make the early childhood education and care in everyday work successful in Finland:

**Child’s Individual ECEC Plan**

Every child has their own early childhood education and care plan. The plan guides the child’s learning and the personnel’s planning for the group. The plan helps to find ways to promote each child’s individual development, learning and wellbeing. The ECEC plan consists of the personnel’s, child’s and the guardians’ observations and views about the child’s wellbeing, development, learning and interaction in a group. A new ECEC plan is drawn up once a year. When assessing the previous plan, the assessment is only focused on the kindergarten’s planned activities, arrangements, learning environments and the pedagogy, not on the child. The child’s strengths, needs and interests are listed on the plan. The measures for achieving the objectives in the ECEC plan are agreed on in co-operation with the child and the guardians. The goals that arise from the children’s individual ECEC plans play a key role when planning activities for the group of children. The goals listed in the plans guide personnel’s pedagogical planning. The professional personnel need to find appropriate methods for meeting the needs, interests and wishes of all the children in the group. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
Co-operation with the Guardians
It is important to work in co-operation with the children's guardians. Guardians know their child best, and in the end, guardians have the main responsibility for bringing up their children. Early childhood education and care supports, helps and complements the guardians' educational task. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016.)

Learning through Play
Children love to play! Therefore, in early childhood education and care, play is a significant way of learning. Play motivates the children and brings joy. In early childhood education and care, it is necessary to understand the value of play for the children. Play has also pedagogical significance in learning as well as in children’s holistic growth and well-being. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016.)

Play is a key practice in early childhood education and care. It is important for the personnel to observe children's play and either guide it from outside or participate in it. The presence of the personnel in play situations support interaction among the children and prevent conflicts. The personnel must also document the children's play. Observation of play gives a lot of information about children's world - their thoughts, interests, emotions and experiences. Children's learning environments need to be flexible, as play and games can take place anywhere depending on the children's imagination and wishes. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
Children grow, develop and learn also in interaction with other people and the environment. Children are naturally curious and they are eager to learn new things. Children often revise and repeat what they have learned. **Learning is holistic and occurs everywhere, all the time.** Learning is a wide term and it combines knowledge, skills, actions, emotions, sensory observations, bodily experiences and thinking. Learning happens for example when children observe and examine their environment and as they imitate other people. Children also learn not only working on assignments and through playing, but also through moving, exploring, expressing themselves and participating in artistic activities. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016.)

In early childhood education and care the interests of the children is the starting point for learning. It is important to acknowledge, that new knowledge and skills are connected to children’s developing competences, as well as the world they experience. Wellbeing and feeling of safety are important for learning. Positive emotional experiences, interactive relationships and feeling of belonging to a group promote learning and participation. Personnel offer support and guidance for learning when needed. Children are inspired to learn more when the activities are interesting, goal-oriented and appropriately challenging. **Each child needs to gain experiences of success and joy** in his or her actions and as a learner. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care 2016.)
Planning and Implementing Pedagogical Activities
The aim of pedagogical activities is to promote children’s learning, well-being and transversal competence. Pedagogical activities are organized in interaction between children and personnel. Children’s interests and questions lay the foundation for the activities. The themes of the activities may emerge from play, fairy tales, excursions or spontaneous situations. Personnel’s sensitive approach and observation is essential. Activities can be free when it is up to children to choose the activity, planned together when the children and personnel come up with the activity together or planned and led when the activity is planned and led by the personnel. Different types of activities supplement one another, and pedagogy is emphasized in all activities. Children’s ECEC plans, interests and needs are always the starting point for planning the activities. The learning areas are also used as a basis for the planning. Documentation, evaluation and development is required for high-quality pedagogical activities. Learning situations, solutions and environments change according to the day, activity and according to the child. Especially children who need extra support benefit from solutions, like small group activities, use of visual aids, individual guidance and differentiation of guidance. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
Learning areas
The Finnish Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care introduces learning areas in early childhood education and care. Learning areas guide the personnel in planning and implementing versatile activities together with the children. The learning areas are divided into five groups:

★ Rich world of languages
★ Diverse forms of expression
★ Me and our community
★ Exploring and interacting with my environment
★ I grow, move and develop

Each area contains objectives and contents of pedagogical activities. Nevertheless, the use of objectives and learning areas can be flexible and creative. Learning objectives are not strictly age related, as all children develop and learn in their own individual pace. The learning areas do not need to be separated, but they can also be freely combined according to children’s interests and skills when planning for activities. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

Early childhood education and care promotes children’s interest in languages, texts and cultures in the area of rich world of languages. Children receive encouraging feedback on their language use and interaction skills. Children of the same age may be going through different phases in different areas of language development, which is an important fact to realize when
planning for activities. This learning area is connected to the development of multiliteracy, as well as transversal competence related to children's cultural skills, interaction and self expression. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

Diverse forms of expression focus on the development of children's musical, visual, verbal, artistic and physical expression. Children get familiar with different forms of expression by using for example different senses, working methods, learning environments, versatile topics that interest children and cultural events as tools for learning. Expression and learning processes highlight experimenting, exploring, practising and documenting. Familiarisation with cultural heritage, art and different forms of expression strengthen children's transversal competences in the areas of multiliteracy, participation and involvement. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
Children’s living environment widens when they start early childhood education and care outside their homes. The mission of the learning area me and our community is to develop children’s understanding about the diversity of the local community and practise acting in it with good manners. The learning area of me and our community supports transversal competences related to children’s cultural competence, interaction and expression, thinking and learning. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

Exploring and interacting in my environment means that children are guided to explore and act in the natural and built environment. Early childhood education and care supports the development of the children’s mathematical thinking, environmental education and technology education. This learning area promotes children’s transversal competence in multiliteracy. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
The learning area of **I grow, move and develop** includes objectives associated with physical activity, food education, health and safety. The aim is to create a foundation for children’s way of living which values health and well-being and promotes physical activity together with the family. I grow, move and develop learning area supports transversal competences related to taking care of oneself and managing daily life. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

**Transversal Competences**

Transversal competence consists of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, will and an ability to apply those in life. The need for transversal competences comes from the world around us. Personal growth, studies, work and civic activity require linking knowledge from different fields, and therefore learning about transversal competences is important. The development of transversal competence starts in early childhood and promotes children’s growth as individuals as well as members of community. *Children’s transversal competences strengthen by high-quality pedagogical activities.* The used pedagogical approaches, used learning environments and the way children’s learning and wellbeing are supported affect on the development of their transversal competences. Here are the five interconnected transversal competence areas:
Children develop their thinking and learning through diverse experiences. Wonder, insights, joy of learning and play are important. Children are encouraged to ask questions, to question, analyze, name, describe and come up with own solutions. It is important to celebrate children’s successes together and encourage others. Children shall not be discouraged by failures. Engaging in daily physical activity supports children’s thinking and learning. Pedagogical documentation together help children notice their learning. Children are encouraged to recognise their strengths and strengthen self-confidence. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

The children are growing up in a culturally, linguistically and ideologically diverse world. This puts emphasis on the significance of social skills, self expression, interaction skills and cultural competence. Competence includes the ability to listen, identify and understand different perspectives as well as to reflect on one’s own values and attitudes. Interaction skills and the ability to express oneself and understand others have a major significance to the individual’s identity, functional capacity and well-being. Good interaction with people with diverse cultural backgrounds and worldviews requires familiarity with and respect for one’s own cultural background and worldview as well as those of others. Children are guided towards friendliness and good manners. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

Taking care of oneself and managing daily life includes supporting children to be independent. Of course children get help and are encouraged to get help whenever needed. Different skills, such as getting dressed and eating is practised with the children. Children are guided to act safely, take care of their well-being, express and regulate emotions and to respect and protect...
their own and others’ bodies. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

**Multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology** is required in the everyday lives and they promote children’s equality in education. Multiliteracy refers to skills that help to interpret and produce various types of messages that may be written, spoken, audiovisual or digital. Multiliteracy comprises different types of literacy, such as visual literacy, numerical literacy, media literacy and basic literacy. Children familiarize with different ICT devices, services and games. Digital documentation is used in various ways. Children are guided to use information and communication technology diversely and safely. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

**Active and responsible participation and involvement** form a foundation for a sustainable and good future. This includes the right to be heard, participation, involvement and taking initiative. Personnel has to encounter children appreciatively, hear their viewpoints, respond to their initiatives, let children help with planning and make sure each child gets an opportunity to participate and be involved. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)

**Documentation**

Pedagogical documentation is a relevant part in planning, implementing, evaluating and developing early childhood education and care. Documentation contains personnel’s and guardians’ observations and child’s photographs, drawings, stories, videos, art works and other files as such. Personnel can freely decide how the documents are stored, in a folder, electronically or in some other way. Pedagogical documentation gives knowledge about the children’s lives, development, interests, thinking, learning, needs and the activities of the group of children. The skills that children have already learned become visible through documentation and can be used as a basis for planning the activities. The child’s individual ECEC
Diverse Working Methods and Learning Environments

Diverse working methods can be utilized in early childhood education and care. Working methods are natural ways for children to learn, and they promote children’s creativity and participation. Methods are such as free play, exploration, physical activity and expression through art. The activities may also include the use of technology. It is important for the personnel to guide the children to try and use different working methods in groups of different sizes, as well as independently. When working with an activity, personnel encourage children to ask questions, wonder, explore and solve problems together. Personnel’s sensitivity to observe children’s initiatives and emotions is essential. Younger children’s initiatives are often physical and non-verbal. Children are eager to explore the world with all senses and their whole bodies, and also try different working methods. Versatile working methods require versatile and flexible learning environments. (National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016.)
Kindiedays as a tool for Documentation and Communication
According to the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, observation and documentation is necessary in various reasons. When personnel document for example child’s play, they get valuable information about the child’s interests and skills. With proper and reliable documentation, it becomes easier to plan the groups’ activities accordingly. Kindiedays is a great tool for documenting the child’s day in detail with pictures, videos, comments and other information. Pedagogical planning for future activities is much easier, when each child’s journal clearly shows what they have been playing and learning during the past weeks.

Documentation of activities can be directly targeted into a certain learning area through Kindiedays. For example, a child participating in a football game would be tagged into I grow, move and develop category. By following the different learning areas, it is easier to track do the planned activities support the child’s development in versatile ways. In Kindiedays, the learning areas also show personnel options of learning objectives, which makes the moment of documentation more precise.

With good documentation, also development and assessment of the planned activities becomes faster for the personnel. When personnel take pictures of, for instance, a cooking activity, they can later go back to the pictures and assess the situation from the children's point of view through their journal and photo album. Were all the children properly included in the activity? What went well? What could I plan differently next time?

Kindiedays is also great with keeping close contact with the guardians, it is easy to share documents of the activities and ask, “Is your child playing this game at home too?”. Guardians’ observations from home are very valuable for ECEC too. The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care defines the framework and guidelines how to work in Finland, and Kindiedays offers great tools to transforming the theory into practice.

Childhood is a precious time of one’s life and documenting all those lovely moments of growing and learning is priceless.
Bibliography