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# Enabling Growth, Learning and Inclusion for all

– Research findings and recommendations for promoting children and young people’s opportunities for multifaceted growth, health and inclusion

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Every child has the right to coherent, healthy and balanced growth and development. Parents, political decision-makers, service systems and the related actors are responsible for ensuring that this right is respected in practice. If the will is strong enough, adults are fully capable of making this happen. No institution alone can ensure that children can grow in peace. But working together, we can make sure that every child can grow into their full potential. Adults must first learn, however, that unbroken and effective paths of growth and learning should be created together with children and young people.

Research data has served as a building block for the foundation for the strategy for children, and over one hundred researchers were asked to describe their most important research results and the recommended actions based on these results. These were gathered into a report, and the included observations and recommendations represent the views of each researcher or group, who also have the ultimate responsibility for their statements. In other words, the aim was not to prepare a comprehensive synthesis of research on children and young people in Finland. The researchers were also asked to describe good practices to promote these suggestions, if possible, and a substantial amount of them was submitted. They will be analysed and presented later, however.

Jouni Välijärvi, Professor of the University of Jyväskylä, has had the main responsibility for editing the collected research data. Researchers and research projects essential for the strategy for children were identified and appointed by the researcher members of the steering group for the strategy for children, who included, in addition to Välijärvi, Niina Junttila, Professor of the University of Turku, Kirsti Karila, Professor of the University of Tampere, Petra Kouvonon, Development Leader/Ombudsman at the Itla Children’s Foundation (ITLA), Marja-Leena Laakso, Professor of the University of Jyväskylä, Anna Rotkirch, Director of the Family Federation of Finland, and Minna Ylikännö, Senior researcher at Kela. Johanna Lammi-Taskula,

Research Manager at the National Institute for Health and Welfare, participated in the work as an expert member. They also performed the first phase analysis of the opinions of researchers within their own area of expertise and prepared summaries based on these analyses. These summaries are also available at the address indicated above.

Perhaps the most important lesson to learn from this collected research material is that the factors that define the quality of life of children and young people tend to accumulate, both for good and for worse. This accumulation makes the problems faced in life mutually reinforcing, and they often become complex and impossible for children and young people to manage without help. In the light of the arguments presented by the researchers, we have a lot of knowledge on harmful factors on child development. In the future, it is important to promote the ability of adults who guide children's life to work together, to listen to the children and to give the children time when they most need it. We should pinpoint assessed methods that are proven effective to prevent intergenerational transmission and negative development.

The material collected from the researchers has been arranged under five themes that reflect basic human needs: human relationships, learning, safety, health and inclusion. Research observations related to birth rate are reviewed transversally in several themes. From the viewpoint of children's and young people's development and learning, the themes are intertwined and their separation would negatively affect the challenges children and young people face in everyday life.

Services that support human relationships are still largely based on the concept of a nuclear family, making the children's rights unclear in case of joint custody, for example. The parents' roles are undergoing a transformation, and the care potential of fathers is largely left unrealised. It is hindered by the inflexible family leave system and traditional attitudes in workplaces. Regulations allow both parents equal right to care for their children but the operational culture of companies, attitudes of the management and values of work communities still often make it difficult for fathers to participate. The most serious threat to long-standing relationships is loneliness of children, which is increasingly more common. Loneliness is linked with several serious threats to health, feeling excluded and losing the meaning of life. Loneliness is a major risk factor to wellbeing, especially for persons with disabilities, people with immigrant background and those who belong to a sexual minority. It is also linked to the socio-economic family background. Research has produced several approaches for preventing loneliness where early childhood education and school, for example, play a major part.

**Learning** is an interactive process activated and guided by motivation. Research on motivation has progressed rapidly in recent years. Meaningfulness of learning and the opportunity to participate in the planning motivate working for promoting knowledge. Although it must be said that different people find very different things motivating. Equality of competence has decreased, even though Finnish education is internationally speaking still very homogenous. The share of low performers has risen sharply and the connection between home background and skills has rapidly intensified. Place of residence is also reflected more clearly in early childhood education and pupils' school performance. This is caused, for example, by regional segregation and segregation within cities. Background has become more evident in education paths, and key choices are made early on. Significant progress has been achieved in the

research on barriers to learning in recent years. The results underline the importance of early years for problem prevention, and numerous support models for early childhood education and schools have been created based on these results.

While the pedagogical opportunities offered by digital transformation have been identified, their exploitation has barely begun. Focusing on worries and threats covers the fact that children and young people use technology in very versatile ways, although this varies greatly. Development of pedagogy requires making use of the experiences and ideas of children and young people. There is a growing body of research evidence on the benefits of art and physical exercise for knowledge-based learning. Cooperation with the third sector is emphasised to provide versatile opportunities and to strengthen hobby activities at schools. Early childhood education and the school integrate more strongly when the objective is to offer children and young people a complete life path. The field of early childhood education is diverse, emphasising the need for municipalities to monitor the quality systems. Support for the personnel's professional development also varies.

**Safety** is children's basic need. All children's experiences of situations that threaten their safety emphasise how important it is for the adults to offer protection and to hear the child in need. While the majority of children and young people are doing well, some face a multitude of simultaneous disorders and disturbances that threaten normal growth. These are strongly linked, for example, to family structures, parents' position on the labour market and their health status. It is also obvious that intergenerational transmission of problems has become increasingly common, making it necessary to offer easily accessible help at as early a stage as possible. Lack of cooperation between services and the adults who provide these services makes it unduly difficult to get necessary help and support. New team-based cooperation models are being developed with the help of research, however. Child health clinics and school health services play a key role in securing the health of children. Both reach nearly all children, and there is broad satisfaction with the work of child health clinics, in particular.

School health services also provide security and they mainly work well, in light of the experiences of both children and parents. Lack of financial security is the root cause of many risks that children face. In recent decades, child poverty has witnessed strong growth. This threatens the wellbeing of children and their undisturbed social relationships in many ways. Financial security and stable life, including the position on the labour market, are also important factors affecting birth rate. They also contribute to advanced maternal age. Respect for their norms and customs creates security for minorities.

**Health** creates a foundation for wellbeing and allows full learning. Mental disorders of children in particular have increased at an alarming rate. The health of children and their families are closely intertwined. Mental and physical health problems of adults often cause strong symptoms in children. Disturbances are strongly reflected in later life and multiply the risk of health problems and exclusion, for example, in adulthood. That is why listening to children and supporting them when their parents have problems is of the utmost importance. Difficult life situations of children and families are further complicated by the fact that they often face very different professional ways of thinking and doing when seeking help. ADHD is an example of a

disorder that requires cooperation between school and health care. It is a particular threat to the wellbeing of boys and those born at the end of the year.

Programmes that promote the health of children and young people are actively developed. The effectiveness of these interventions has been verified with experimental study designs but research evidence is needed to demonstrate their functionality at population level. Taking care of one's health improves the quality of life, and physical exercise plays a key role here. The amount of physical exercise that young Finnish people get has radically decreased. This contributes to overweight and creates negative body images. More exercise has been added to national programmes for early childhood education and schools. Urban development is one key factor that can either promote or inhibit everyday physical activity.

Inclusion offers children and young people an opportunity to be a part of community. Truly listening to a child creates a sense of inclusion. A child has a unique view and interpretation of the world that must be respected and valued, even if an adult strongly disagrees with it. School children are less able and inclined to participate in community activities than their peers in most other countries, challenging us to develop our school culture. Inclusion is inadequately fulfilled in our current formal structures of participation. Student unions and legislative hearing procedures are perceived to represent the adult world, and most are not convinced of their significance.

Meaningful inclusion happens in everyday life when children and young people can make decisions concerning their own living environment, for example. Many things that adults consider trivial and minor are of prime importance to children. Children themselves emphasise sense of community but the available structures are mainly based on individual activity. It is essential to support the inclusion of special groups that are often almost completely ignored, creating loneliness and sense of exclusion at an early age. Physical distance is another limiting factor but virtual communities are a partial solution to this problem. In addition to virtual models, development of research-based inclusion models is very active.

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