

Help and Support for Families with Children



MANNERHEIMIN
LASTENSUOJELULIITTO



Every child is entitled to a good and happy childhood.

MLL – Improving Children’s Lives for Over 90 Years

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL) is a Finnish civic organization that has worked towards the implementation of children’s rights in Finland since 1920. In the early 20th century, the League’s activities centred on developing primary health care for children. MLL was the organization that established the first maternity clinic, created a network of maternity and child welfare clinics throughout the country, launched Home Aid operations and developed training and education in the field of childcare in Finland. Later, the organization of welfare and health services became the task of the public sector. Today the League’s operations centre on civic activities, influencing society and organizing various kinds of peer support for families with children.

MLL is the largest child welfare organization in Finland and its nationwide central organization includes 10 district organizations and 566 local associations. The League’s Central Office is located in Helsinki. Its district organizations have more than 92,000 members.

Over 20,000 volunteers take part in MLL’s voluntary activities every year. The League has 551 employees, 66 of whom work in the Central Office. More than half of the financing of this nationwide central organization is composed of the contributions of Finland’s Slot Machine Association which supports non-profit social and health care work. Other financing derives from grants allocated by municipalities, the organization’s own fund-raising and donations.

Almost every municipality in Finland has an MLL local association in it. These promote the welfare of families with children by offering peer support and organizing open meeting places, events and lectures about parenthood for families and leisure activities for children. Local associations and district organizations also produce services for families and develop Family Centre operations in cooperation with municipalities.

Civic Organizations in Finland

Civic organizations have a strong standing in Finland. The Finnish government has pledged itself to support the operational preconditions of non governmental organizations and the persevering development of civic society policies, and cooperation with organizations belongs to every ministry's sphere of authority.

Civic organizations promote citizens' participation and everyday well-being. The people participating in the activities of civic organizations are responsible for them, and participation is voluntary. Many organizations focus on peer activities carried out through voluntary work, but organizations also produce services in cooperation with municipalities.

The operations of civic organizations are non-profit-making and independent of the state. Organizations actively engage in social dialogue and produce information and insight for decision making.

Four out of five Finns are members of an organization. There are 127,000 registered associations in Finland and approximately 200 nationwide organizations in the social and health care sector, with thousands of local associations under them. Voluntary work plays a key role in these organizations and is multifaceted. Some 250,000 people are estimated to participate annually in voluntary work for organizations within the social and health care sector alone. Voluntary work also has an economic effect. According to research, the cost-benefit of such work is sixfold.



Finnish Families with Children

At the end of 2011, there were 5 401,267 inhabitants in Finland, and 1 081,766 or 20 % of them were children (under 18 years of age). There were 580,547 families with children, i.e. families with at least one child under 18 years old living at home. Of families with children, 20 % were one-parent families.

As in other Nordic countries, the birth rate in Finland is high compared to other European countries. The average number of children in families has grown slightly, but at the same time the percentage of adults with no children has increased. In 2011, there were 59,961 children born, with the average age of all the mothers approximately 30 and of first-time mothers roughly 28.

Almost all families expecting a baby, and also children under school age, visit a maternity or child health clinic for regular periodic check-ups.

Home care of children under three years of age is common in Finland. Children from the age of three to school age are usually placed in day care.

Pre-primary education in Finland begins at the age of six and the nine years of basic education at the age of seven. Pre-primary education is not compulsory, but almost all children participate in it. Finnish children's school days are quite short by international standards but their learning results rank extremely high. Children in the 1st and 2nd forms (ages 7 and 8) have activities organized for them both before and

after school. These are voluntary and subject to a charge.

Parents' employment rate is high in Finland, although families also utilise the family leave system to a high degree. By European standards, the employment rate of parents with under 18-year-old children is high, almost 90 %.

Children's Welfare

The majority of young and school age children in Finland are healthy and feel well. The socio-economic differences in the health of the population have increased, however, and their effects can already be seen in children.

The threats to young children's welfare include, for example, their parents' depression, divorce and losing contact with one of the parents, parents' drinking and the family's poverty, the last of which particularly affects one-parent families. Many wealthy parents also experience loneliness and do not receive sufficient help from their network of friends and family for one reason or another.

Families feel that the time they spend together is insufficient, and approximately one in four school children have parents who are divorced. Parents' unemployment is known to be linked to young people's mental ill-health. Several challenges have been perceived in the health habits of school age children and young people, such as too little sleep, neglecting to take care of their teeth, excessive screen time and too little exercise.

Often the changes in health and well-being formed in childhood and youth are permanent. Acquired habits in health and



well-being may therefore be a strong predictor of how a person will get along in later life and what kinds of possible problems can be anticipated. The focus of service development in Finland lies currently on preventive health and welfare work.

Services for Families with Children

By international standards, Finland has an extensive municipal self-government. By law, municipalities are responsible for organizing basic services for their residents, but there are a great many differences between the services provided in different municipalities. Municipalities have economised on many services aimed at children, such as school health care and home help services for families with children. Because families in need of support generally face many kinds of challenges, efforts have been made to develop new kinds of courses of action

in the services provided and models of collaboration have been sought between social, health care and educational and cultural services.

Family Centres are an example of this. The target of these centres is to group services in one place, bring services close to families with children and provide support in children's own growth environments as early as possible before their problems become critical. In Finland, the services provided at Family Centres are developed in cooperation with various organizations.

MLL is a key third-sector partner in cultivating the services offered by Family Centres. The Family Centre activities produced by the League itself are mainly based on professionally controlled voluntary work and the active participation of families.

Voluntary Work

Within MLL, volunteers work approximately 310,000 hours in a year. Voluntary work in the League includes, for example, organizing Family Café activities, acting as a peer student, running clubs and groups, acting as a communal grandparent and organizing various lectures and local events for children and families. With the support of one of the League's professional instructors, volunteers also act as support persons for families with children and take calls on helplines.

The volunteer contribution supplements professional services, but it cannot replace services that are lacking from the public sector. The League makes sure that volunteers are not given tasks that require professional know-how and involve corresponding responsibility.

Usually people become volunteers after they have first participated in the League's open activities and felt that

they made a difference. The motivation to be a volunteer arises from the desire to help and participate. When someone has received help themselves, they want to give it to others. It is the League's responsibility to create an environment for volunteers where they can learn new things and get support and guidance in their tasks.

Volunteers are entitled to decide on the limits of their duties and the time they spend on them according to their own starting points. MLL's volunteers commit themselves to ethical principles which include, for example, respecting others, respecting children and childhood, confidentiality, obligation of secrecy and equality.

The League's volunteer work is founded on national operations models. MLL offers its volunteers training and supports their actions by directing the activities professionally.

"Although I'm the supporter, I get so much from the families myself. I've had to learn to listen and see things from another person's perspective."

A volunteer support person

Local Family Centre Activities

MLL's local associations organize open meeting places with a low threshold of participation and various peer groups and clubs for families. The League's activities form a part of municipalities' Family Centre services. In Finland, a Family Centre refers to multiprofessional services that are aimed at families with children and whose target is to offer support as early as possible. The municipality in question is responsible for offering services to families with children and the organizations participating in providing the services develop forms of activities together with the municipality.

In MLL, Family Centre activities are mainly organized using volunteers. District organizations are in charge of directing the activities and training volunteers. The central organization is responsible for the modelling of the activities, developing training models and monitoring and evaluating the operations.

The League trains volunteers to recognise situations where a participant in a group, or a parent visiting a Family Café, needs to be guided to a professional for help. For example, long-lasting melancholy, the culmination of problems in a relationship or exhaustion are problems that require professional help.

MLL's open meeting places and leisure activities are intended for all families with children. The League's Family Centre activities generate more than 800,000 encounters with children and parents every year.

MLL's Family Centre activities include various peer groups, Family Cafés, children's clubs, communal grand parenting and support person functions for families with children. A new project is the newly launched programme 'Become a Friend to an Immigrant Mother'. For this, the League recruits and trains volunteer mothers as friends to immigrant mothers. They help these immigrant mothers in the usual everyday business, such as guiding them in how local services work and telling them where they can find various offices.

Peer Groups

MLL's district organizations and local associations organize over 250 peer groups for parents. The number of visits to the groups is almost 26,000. Peer group instructors are given MLL's instructor training for such groups. Instructors are often volunteers, but they may also be hired by the association or district organization.

Participants in these groups have an opportunity to make new friends and talk about parenting and their everyday experiences. Participants in the League's peer groups find friends, their own partners and relatives the most important supporters in their parenthood. It is well worth investing in early support that strengthens families' own resources.

Family Cafés

MLL has more than 460 Family Cafés, which are meeting places for parents and children alike. The Family Café instructor is a volunteer. Family Cafés assemble



usually once a week for a few hours at a time, for example, in the club room of a residential building, a park or a municipal Family Centre. The café programme is planned together with the participants and, in addition to free discussion, it includes structured activities and short presentations on subjects that parents are interested in.

Participants in Family Cafés, as well as the instructor, are generally parents who take care of their children at home. Their most important reason to attend the café is that their children can play with other children. Parents also want to meet other parents and talk. A third of the visitors say that they have no social network at hand.

The Family Café reaches many kinds of families that share the same situation in life. A great many of the visitors say that the café has helped them to adjust to their new locality and that it has provided them with information about services for families with children.

“For many parents, Family Cafés are an indispensable place to make friends, share parenting experiences and find peer support. Without them a lot of things would be worse.”

a Family Café visitor

Tips worth their weight in gold from other mothers in the group for everyday life with a baby.



Support Persons for Families with Children

MLL's support person activities for families with children consists of professionally directed voluntary work. Our target is to increase the families' well-being and strengthen the whole family's welfare. The League makes a contract with the municipality about the organization of these activities. The support persons are voluntary peers trained by the League who, with the support of a League employee, agree with the family they will be working with on when and how to begin.

The support person participates in the family's everyday activities together with the parent, such as taking the children out to play. The parent can chat with the support person, share their feelings with them and receive support and encouragement in coping in their parenthood. The League gives the support person basic training and instruction in their tasks.

Communal Grand Parenting

After breaking free from working life, many pensioners want to take part in civic activities and share their competence and life experiences in a form of voluntary work that they perceive as meaningful.

Many children have grandparents who live a long distance away. One in five of the visitors to the League's Family Cafés say that they rarely meet their children's grandparents. The League's Communal Grand Parenting activities increase interaction between generations and offer children a feeling of communal security.

MLL's operation includes approximately 350 communal grandparents who work as volunteers in Family Cafés, day-care centres, children's clubs and libraries. They read, play, participate in arts and crafts and come along on excursions with the children. They are never alone with a group of children; instead, either the children's parents or an employee is always in charge of the group.

A communal grandparent's most important job is to give children some time with an adult and a secure presence. Playing, joy and natural feedback from children also boost the well-being of the aging volunteers. Voluntary work also decreases elderly persons' loneliness and gives their lives new meaning.

"Where my skills are no longer enough, that's where children's imagination begins."

Grandad



Children's Clubs

MLL's club activities for children offer more than 10,000 children every year an opportunity to try a hobby and learn new things together with other children. The children participating in the clubs are mainly under school age. There is usually a small participation fee for the clubs.

The club activities are founded on the principles of children and young people participating and playing and shared activities for children and adults. The clubs generally assemble once a week and their programme consist of exercise, music, play and art. For children, the most important things offered by the clubs are exercise, playing and having friends.

"Every time I go to the club I have fun. I like needlework and drawing."

A visitor to a club

Child and Youth Phone and Online Services

The Child and Youth Phone and Online Services are aimed at under 21-year-olds and they serve them every day of the year. Founded in 1980, the Child and Youth Phone is the only nationwide, Finnish-speaking helpline for all children and young people. Children can talk free of charge, anonymously and confidentially to a trained adult volunteer. The helpline's operation is guided by ethical principles that have been agreed upon by PuhEet, the Finnish Advisory Committee for the Ethical Principles of Helplines. The Letter Service of the Youth Online Services is based on the same ethical and functional principles. An MLL employee is always on duty to support the group of volunteers taking calls and messages on the Child and Youth Phone and Online Services.

School Peace Programme

The School Peace Programme produces operations models and materials for schools to create a safe school day and school year. The programme increases pupils' comfort and enjoyment at school, secures their mental, physical and social safety and strengthens the team spirit of the school community. With the School Peace Programme, MLL spreads the idea, coming "from young people for young people," about preventing bullying and strengthening solidarity at school. The programme is implemented in cooperation with pupils and teachers and other partners.

Preventing Bullying

MLL is working to influence the attitudes behind bullying and other violence and to promote the mental and physical safety of children and young people at schools. At MLL, attention is also paid to online bullying and the bullying of under school-age children. The League offers teachers and parents information and tools for preventing and handling situations of bullying. The League also offers support for the victims and encourages children and young people to act in ways that prevent it occurring. MLL is collaborating extensively with other operators working towards developing methods to prevent bullying.

Peer Student Scheme

Since 1972, MLL has actively developed the Peer Student Scheme which supports pupil's well-being and a good school atmosphere. The Peer Student activities are founded on peer support. Their target is to improve the school atmosphere and reduce bullying at school. A peer student is a volunteer pupil who wants to work towards a better school community and help other pupils. Participation is the key element in the Peer Student Scheme, i.e. young people's opportunity to think of ideas themselves, implement their ideas and assess their activities. An adult instructor working at the school is in charge of the scheme. The League's central and district organizations maintain a nationwide network for the Peer Student Scheme, including approximately 14,000 peer students, 800 peer student instructors and 70 trainers.





Professional Work and Development at Mannerheim League for Child Welfare

Family Services

In addition to voluntary work, MLL offers professional help for families with children. MLL's district organizations provide family services and care for sick children which municipalities buy for families. The district organizations also offer temporary child care help for families, for example, if the parents need time together or a child is ill and cannot be taken to day care. The League trains and supplies baby sitters for families with children, but parents pay the minder's salary and take care of the necessary insurance policies. Municipalities support the organization of the operation through subsidies and also compensate low-income families for childcare fees on a means-test basis.

Strength for Parenting

The target of the Strength for Parenting Project is to cultivate a group-form model for guiding parents that strengthens the psychosocial support given to families. The League trains municipality employees to become family group instructors for families who have recently had their first child. Our purpose is to spread this operations model and instil it throughout the country as part of the maternity and child welfare clinic operations and family services.

Municipal employees will be offered a new working method for supporting parenthood and provided the readiness to function as an instructor to different family groups. The target is to learn a new working attitude where thinking about and discussing things and observing situations of interaction together with the parents are the key factors.

The family group activities will strengthen a parent's ability to observe and understand their baby's needs and feelings and to respond to them. Another objective of the family groups is to promote equal parenting which supports a child's development and to strengthen the parents' relationship in the middle of the changes taking place after a child is born.

"Parenting is far from easy and definitely not light work, and you can't make it without peer support and friends!"

The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL)
is a civic organization that works to promote
children's right to a good and happy childhood.

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