

**Who needs nurseries and why?
Selected arguments of the public debate on nursery care
in Poland after 1989 in relation to parents' opinions on this form
of care for children under 3 years of age***

**Komu i po co potrzebne są żłobki?
Wybrane argumenty publicznej debaty o żłobkach w Polsce po 1989 r.
na tle opinii rodziców o tej formie opieki nad dziećmi do lat 3**

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Summary: In Polish family policy, the volatility of policymakers' preferences is easy to see, especially in the case of nurseries, which, as the ongoing public discourse on their evaluation shows, have as many supporters as opponents. The following text attempts to identify the main determinants of change in that part of family policy which concerns the development of institutional childcare over the last thirty years. The second part of this paper presents the arguments of parents who use the services of nurseries. The second part of the paper presents the arguments of parents who are users of nursery services, on the basis of selected results of quantitative empirical research on opinions about nursery care and its evaluation in comparison with other forms of care for young children. The conclusion points to solutions that – in the opinion of the parents – should be implemented in order to support the families in carrying out their care tasks.

Key words: family policy goals, nursery, institutional care for a child under 3 years, public debate, parents' opinion, the Maluch plus program

Streszczenie: W polskiej polityce rodzinnej zmienność preferencji decydentów jest łatwo zauważalna, zwłaszcza w przypadku żłobków, które – jak wskazuje ciągły dyskurs publiczny na temat ich oceny – mają tyle samo zwolenników, co przeciwników. W tekście podjęto próbę identyfikacji głównych czynników zmian w tej części polityki rodzinnej, która dotyczy rozwoju instytucjonalnej opieki nad małym dzieckiem w ostatnich trzydziestu latach. W drugiej części artykułu, opartej na wynikach badań empirycznych, przedstawiono opinie rodziców korzystających z usług żłobków w porównaniu z innymi formami opieki nad małym dzieckiem. W konkluzji wskazano rozwiązania, które – w opinii rodziców – powinny zostać wdrożone, aby wspierać rodziny w realizacji zadań opiekuńczych.

Słowa kluczowe: cele polityki rodzinnej, żłobek, opieka instytucjonalna nad dzieckiem do lat 3, debata publiczna, opinia rodziców, program Maluch plus

Introduction

Family policy requires reasonable stability of goals and instruments, as well as sustainable solutions. Only then will it enable families to

make autonomous choices in accordance with their needs. Fulfilling these conditions gives families a sense of security and allows the state to stimulate attitudes or behaviors (e.g., regarding procreation decisions) that are im-

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portant for society as a whole, which determines the effectiveness of the policy¹.

During the 30 years of system transformation in Poland, social and economic conditions have changed radically. All public policies, including family policy – its goals, actors and instruments – have undergone a complex process of evolution. These changes have not always been positive².

Both scientific works on changes in Polish family policy - including publications based on empirical research – and political documents (social and economic programs of successive governments and local governments, as well as programs of political parties) allow us to propose the thesis that Polish family policy is characterized by instability, i.e. changeability of goals and directions of preferred actions. This is mainly related to the system of values and goals incorporated into the ideology of successive political parties that take over the government in Poland. The needs of families and changes in them are often of secondary importance.

These changes can be seen, among other things, in the preferred forms of care provided by the family for young children and in the support (or reduction of support) for certain forms of this care, as well as in the arguments used to justify the measures taken in this regard³.

The variability of preferences in family policy is readily apparent. It is particularly clear in the case of nurseries, which, as the course of public discourse on their evaluation since 1989 shows, have as many supporters as opponents⁴.

The text presented below is an attempt to identify the main determinants of changes in this part of family policy, which concerns the development of institutional care for a young child from the beginning of the transition period to the beginning of the third decade of the current century. The analysis of selected areas of public discourse on nursery care will reveal the immediate purpose and the arguments most frequently used by representatives of institutions that have a significant impact on determining the directions of development of Polish family policy (in the context of supporting the care function of families⁵).

Discussions about nurseries that took place before 2016 were the premise for the empirical research cited in the second part of the article. It presents selected opinions of parents who use nursery services. This is because parents are a stakeholder group that does not have a formal structure. For this reason, they have limited influence and opportunity to have their opinions and demands taken into account in the decision-making process⁶.

The opinions of parents used in the content were obtained through a nationwide quantitative empirical study conducted in 2017 on the evaluation of nursery care and its comparison with other forms of care for a young children.

The conclusion notes the need to implement family policy solutions to the caregiving function of the family, taking into account both the opinions of stakeholders (different sides of the public debate) and the interdisciplinary determinants of the purpose, instruments and consequences of decisions made by the

¹ Sheila B. Kamerman, *O polityce rodzinnej: definicje, zasady, praktyka [On family policy: definitions, principles, practice]* (Warszawa: Instytut Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych, 1994).

² Douglas Coupland, *Pokolenie X [X Generation]* (Warszawa: Pruszyński i Ska, 1999).

³ NIK, *Koordinacja polityki rodzinnej w Polsce. Informacja o wynikach kontroli [Coordination of family policy in Poland. Information on audit results]* (Warszawa: Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2015).

⁴ KPRP, *Jak wspierać odpowiedzialne rodzicielstwo? Forum Debaty Publicznej: Solidarne Państwo – Bezpieczna Rodzina [How to support responsible parenthood? Public Debate Forum: Solidary State – Safe Family]* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2013). Tymoteusz Zych, Karolina Dobrowolska, Olaf Szczypiński, ed., *Jakiej polityki rodzinnej potrzebuje Polska? [What family policy does Poland need?]* (Warszawa: Fundacja Instytut Kultury Prawnej Ordo Iuris, 2015).

⁵ Klaudia Wolniewicz-Słomka, „Między pracą a rodziną – opieka nad najmłodszym dzieckiem w debacie prasowej” [“Between work and family – taking care of the youngest children as presented in the press”], *Szkoła – Zawód – Praca* No. 2 (2021): 201–221.

⁶ Adam Bosiacki et al., *Nowe zarządzanie publiczne i public governance w Polsce i w Europie [New public management and public governance in Poland and Europe]* (Warszawa: Liber, 2010).

government and local governments in the analyzed area.

Determinants of institutional care development policy for young children after 1989

An analysis of the factors that determined the directions of development of support for the family's childcare function with regard to young children (i.e. up to the age of 3) allows us to state that throughout the period of systemic transformation in Poland, family policy was most often perceived in its broad (explicit) sense, which also included elements found in other specific areas of social policy, such as population policy, employment policy or social welfare policy. The boundaries between these policies and family policy were often blurred, as their objectives – in general – coincided and it was possible (and was done) to try to achieve them with common instruments.

Among the conditions that most clearly emerged in different periods of systemic transformation as justification for the choice of instruments to support families in caring for a young child were:

- a) the demographic situation of the country,
- b) the labor market situation,
- c) the implementation of the principles of equal treatment,
- d) the material living conditions of the population,
- e) the value system and its hierarchy.

These determinants – of different nature, strength and scope of influence on family policy – have emerged at different times over the past three decades, usually together with other conditions important for state policy. Along with the intensification of their influence on the priority directions of the country's social and economic development, the goals to be achieved by supporting families in caring for children have changed. Preferences for the development of specific forms of this support also changed. Each of the three decades had its peculiarities⁷.

In the first ten years of systemic transformation in Poland, family policy was strongly influenced by the situation on the labour market. The implementation of objectives related to the improvement of the material living conditions of the population, the reduction of social exclusion and poverty also occupied an important place⁸.

The second decade (2000–2010), especially its second half, was a period of visible subordination of family policy to priorities related to the implementation of the principles of equal opportunities and equal treatment. At that time, the situation on the labour market was still of great importance for family policy (support for women's professional activity), while the needs related to the material situation of families had much less influence on family policy solutions, including support for those who failed to cope with the challenges of the market economy⁹.

⁷ Marek Rymśa, „Polityka rodzinna: cele, wartości, rozwiązania – w poszukiwaniu konsensualnego programu” [„Family policy: goals, values, solutions – in search of a consensual programme”], *Studia BAS* 1(45) (2016): 55–76. Maciej Sobociński, „Kierunki polityki państwa wobec rodziny w latach 1989–2015” [„Overview of the Polish family policy in 1989–2015”], *Studia BAS* 1(45) (2016): 31–54.

⁸ Bożena Balcerzak-Paradowska, *Rodzina i polityka rodzinna na przełomie wieków. Przemiany, zagrożenia, potrzeba działań* [The family and family policy at the turn of the century. Transitions, threats, need for action] (Warszawa: IPiSS, 2004). Agnieszka Szczudlińska-Kanoś, *Polska polityka rodzinna w okresie przemian Kontekst krajowy i międzynarodowy* [Polish family policy in transition National and international contexts] (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 2019). „Program Polityki Rodzinnej” [„Programme for the Family”], *Przegląd Rządowy* 8–9 (1997): 227–230. Program „Polityka Prorodzinna Państwa”, przyjęty w dniu 3 XI 1999 r. przez Radę Ministrów [State Family Policy Programme, adopted by the Council of Ministers 3 XI 1999], accessed 16.12.2023, https://www.srk.opoka.org.pl/srk/srk_pliki/dokumenty/pppp1.html. Sobociński, *Kierunki*, 31–54.

⁹ Piotr Szukalski, „Przemiany rodziny – wyzwania dla polityki rodzinnej. Artykuł dyskusyjny” [„Transforming the Family – Challenges for Family Policy. Discussion Paper”], *Polityka Społeczna* 8(2007): 50–53. Arkadiusz Durasiewicz, „Analiza programów polityki rodzinnej w latach 1997–2013” [„Analysis of family policy programs in the years 1997–2013”], *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu* nr 456 (2016), DOI: 10.15611/pn.2016.456.01. Joanna Szczepaniak-Sienniak, „Polityka rodzinna państwa we współczesnej Polsce” [„State family policy in contemporary Poland”], *Spoleczeństwo i Ekonomia* 2(4) (2015): 100–115. Sobociński, *Kierunki*, 31–54.

The last decade under consideration (2011–2021) is divided almost equally into two distinctly different periods in terms of the determinants of the family policies implemented at the time. Until 2016, the family policy orientations of the previous decade are continued. The participation of both parents in the labour market is promoted ('equality' solutions), but it is increasingly clear that family policy also takes account of changes in values. In addition, family policy increasingly includes elements of demographic policy (supporting parenthood and stimulating procreative decisions; reconciling work and parental responsibilities)¹⁰. After 2015, a much clearer focus of family policy instruments on supporting demographic change has been declared. In this context, the importance of material living conditions and the value system relevant to the functioning of families and the number of children born is also clearly emphasised¹¹.

In general, the dominance of the liberal current in government policy was accompanied by the development of nursery care. This approach was also supported by the policies of the left-wing current. On the other hand, when conservative and right-wing groups were in government in Poland, more emphasis was placed on supporting family forms of child care. The changing governments introduced solutions in accordance with their own ideology and the image of family functioning inscribed in it, rather softly, without making radical decisions in this area. In short, solutions have

been introduced to support a certain model of family functioning, while support for other models has been withdrawn. The main variable differentiating these models is the perception of the role of women in the family and in society¹².

One of the characteristics of nursery care is its location outside the family and its institutional structure (its organizational and legal positioning in family policy). As a result, its evolution has been driven by changes in the external environment of the family to a much greater extent than other forms of care.

The 1990s

The first years of transition had a negative impact on family policy as a whole, including nursery care. The understanding of the social functions of the state changed¹³.

The social activities of workplaces were reduced. Under market conditions, employers have reduced social spending, including spending on organizing and subsidizing child care for their employees. Nurseries run by workplaces and local governments were rapidly liquidated due to costs. Demand for these services also declined: in conditions of very high and rising unemployment, institutional care for a young child became both too expensive and often unnecessary, as child care was taken over by unemployed parents.

Some anti-unemployment programs emphasized that the development of non-parental care was an important, and often indispensable, condition for women's economic activation¹⁴,

¹⁰ *Założenia polityki ludnościowej Polski 2012 [Population policy assumptions of Poland 2012]*, (Warszawa, Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2012). *Dobry Klimat dla Rodziny. Program Polityki Rodzinnej Prezydenta RP [A Good Climate for Families. Presidential Programme on Family Policy]* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2013).

¹¹ Irena Elżbieta Kotowska, „Uwagi o urodzeniach i niskiej dzietności w Polsce oraz polityce rodzinnej wspierającej prokreację” [„Comments on births and low fertility in Poland and family policies in support of procreation”], *Studia Demograficzne* 2(176) (2019): 11–29, <https://doi.org/10.33119/SD.2019.2.1>. Lucyna Prorok, *Polityka rodzinna w Polsce 1918–2020 [Family policy in Poland 1918–2020]* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2021). Szczudlińska-Kanoś, Polska.

¹² Małgorzata Cieślak-Florczyk, „Problemy współczesnej kobiety w kontekście wizerunku kreowanego przez programy wyborcze partii politycznych z 2011 roku” [„Problems of modern woman in the context of image created by political parties' election programs in 2011”], *Świat Idei i Polityki* 12 (2013): 11–25. NIK, *Koordinacja polityki rodzinnej w Polsce. Informacja o wynikach kontroli [Coordination of family policy in Poland. Information on audit results]* (Warszawa: Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2015).

¹³ Stanisława Golinowska, *Polityka społeczna. Koncepcje – instytucje – koszty [Social Policy. Concepts – institutions – costs]* (Warszawa: PWE, 2000).

¹⁴ Elżbieta Kryńska, *Polityka państwa na rynku pracy w Polsce w latach dziesięćdziesiątych [State policy on the labour market in Poland in the 1990s]* (Warszawa: IPiSS, 1998).

Table 1. *Changes in access to nurseries between 1990 and 1999*

Specification	1990	1995	1990 = 100	1999	1995 = 100
Facility	1412	591	41,9	469	79,4
– of which public:		580	-	461	79,5
Places in nurseries in thous	95,8	37,9	39,6	32	84,4
– of which public:		37,2	-	31,4	84,4
Children staying in nurseries (during the year) in thous	137,5	69,3	50,4	56,9	82,1
Nursery places for 1000 children up to 3 years old in cities	104	51	49,0	50	98,0
Children staying in nurseries per 1000 children up to the age of 3	42	23	54,8	23	100,0

Source: *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2001 [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2001]* (Warszawa: GUS, 2002), 278.

but there were few initiatives to create nurseries. Workplaces, which were just learning how to function in a market economy, were getting rid of social burdens. The commercial sector began to develop, but the still insufficient number of facilities and care places did not meet demand. Moreover, access to private services was severely limited due to high costs.

The first decade of political transition ended with a serious regression of nursery care. High unemployment – paradoxically – “muted” the problem of inadequate access to non-parental care for young children in Poland¹⁵. Government policies emphasized the value of entrepreneurship (as one of the means of professional activation) and promoted women's careers in this regard. However, it has completely ignored the fact that an extremely important facilitator in running one's own business is support in providing child care, especially access to nursery care¹⁶.

First decade of the 21st century

The years 2000–2010 were another period of important socio-economic changes that strongly influenced the living and functioning conditions of families. At the beginning of this period, preparations for Poland's integration into the European Union (2004) were also evident in family policy. Numerous pre-accession

projects co-financed by the European Social Fund (European Funds in Poland) were implemented. Their goals were related to the need to increase women's employment, to implement the principle of gender equality and to face demographic challenges. Indirectly, these activities influenced the material living conditions of families and supported the process of social inclusion by poverty reduction, especially child poverty.

The possibility of investing significant resources in the organization of non-family care for young children resulted, among other things, from the EU's socio-economic development strategies, including the goals of the so-called Barcelona Summit¹⁷. These stated that by 2010 at least 33% of children under the age of 3 should be in institutional, non-family care. In 2005, as in 2010, this rate in Poland was the lowest in the entire EU (2% compared to the EU average of 28%; Eurostat data).

Measures financed from EU funds were aimed not only at ensuring spatial accessibility to nurseries, but also at eliminating all other barriers to broadly understood accessibility (cost, quality and organization). Local governments and non-governmental organizations, among others, have been significantly involved in building the network of institutional care for young children. Their cooperation has resulted

¹⁵ Marek Rymysza, ed., *Reformy społeczne. Bilans dekady [Social Reforms. Balance of a decade]* (Warszawa: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2004).

¹⁶ Bożena Balcerzak-Paradowska et. al., *Przedsiębiorczość kobiet w Polsce [Women's entrepreneurship in Poland]* (Warszawa: PARP, 2011). Iga Magda, *Jak zwiększyć aktywność zawodową kobiet w Polsce? [How to increase the labour force participation of women in Poland?]*, accessed 20.11.2023, https://ibs.org.pl/app/uploads/2020/01/IBSOPP00102020_PL.pdf.

¹⁷ *Barcelona goals. Developing childcare facilities in Europe for sustainable and inclusive growth*, European Commission, COM(2013).322.final, Bruksela 2002.

Table 2. *Changes in access to nurseries between 2000 and 2010*

Specification	2000	2005	2000 = 100	2010	2005 = 100
Facility	428	371	86,7	392	105,7
– of which public:	416	356	85,6	372	104,5
Places in nurseries in thous.	29,9	25,2	84,3	32,5	129,0
– of which public:	29,1	24,3	83,5	31,0	127,6
Children staying in nurseries (during the year) in thous.	52,8	47,6	90,2	56,9	119,3
Nursery places for 1000 children up to 3 years old in cities	47	41	87,2	44,5	108,5
Children staying in nurseries per 1000 children up to the age of 3	21	21	100	27	128,6

Source: *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2000 [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2000]* (Warszawa: GUS, 2001), 389; *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2011 [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2011]* (Warszawa: GUS, 2011), 376.

in modern, well-prepared activities in terms of educational content, in which local communities (mainly parents of young children) have been involved¹⁸. The first flexible kindergartens also appeared, overcoming enormous organizational and mental barriers. They were characterized mainly by adapting their functioning hours to the needs of local communities and rigid labor market. They gained a good opinion of parents using these solutions, but not everyone understood the principles of their operation¹⁹. Thus, flexible nurseries developed very slowly, although they responded to very urgent needs of parents²⁰. However, not only quantitative but also qualitative development of nursery care was noticeable.

Apart from the network of public and community nurseries, more and more private institutions were established, well-equipped and offering a wide range of additional activities for children. Nurseries run by companies have also re-emerged. These few facilities were ma-

inly organized by large foreign corporations. However, there were still too few nurseries in relation to parents' needs. *Some parents whose children have reached age 2.5 have taken the opportunity to enroll their children in preschools*²¹. The first waiting lists of children for a place in the institutions were introduced and they did not only concern public institutions²².

In the first decade of the 21st century, the provision of childcare was not supported by extending and shortening maternity leaves. On the other hand, the 2004 reform of family benefits had no significant impact on the use of various forms of care for young children; mainly due to their insignificance for families' budgets.

The statutory possibility (since 2009) to allocate funds from company social funds to create and finance company nurseries remained unused. The cost of running such institutions was too high for most employers. On the other hand, it became popular to subsidize childcare

¹⁸ KPRP, *Jak wspierać odpowiedzialne rodzicielstwo? Forum Debaty Publicznej: Solidarne Państwo – Bezpieczna Rodzina [How to support' responsible parenthood? Public Debate Forum: Solidary State – Safe Family]* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2013).

¹⁹ Maciej Muczyński, Małgorzata Żynel, „Elastyczne przedszkole i żłobek – model placówki samorządowej dostosowanej do potrzeb rodziców” [„Flexible kindergarten and nursery – model of local government institution adjusted to parents' needs”], In: *System of institutional child care in terms of reconciliation of professional and family life*, ed. Cecylia Sadowska-Snarska (Białystok: WSE w Białymstoku, 2007).

²⁰ Monika Rościszewska-Woźniak, ed., *Standardy jakości opieki i wspierania rozwoju dzieci do lat 3. żłobek [Quality standards of care and support of children's development up to the age of 3. nursery]* (Warszawa: Fundacja Rozwoju Dzieci J.A. Ko-meńskiego Comenius, 2017).

²¹ In 2021, it was 22,300 children. Source: *Oświata i Wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2020/2021 [Education in the 2020/2021 school year]* (GUS, Warszawa-Gdańsk, 2021), 57.

²² Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak, Iga Magda, *Opieka nad dziećmi do lat 3 w Polsce – diagnoza oraz rekomendacje dotyczące zmian [Care for children under 3 in Poland – diagnosis and recommendations for changes]* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2013). *Informacja na temat funkcjonowania żłobków w latach 2001–2011 [Information on the functioning of nurseries in 2001–2011]* (Warszawa: MPiPS, 2012).

for employees' children in institutions outside the company²³.

The years 2000–2010 witnessed a decrease in the number of nurseries, with an increase in the number of childcare places and significant commercialization of services. This process resulted in the deterioration of childcare quality and reduced parental trust in the offer of large institutions²⁴.

Period 2011–2022

The years after 2010 constitute a period of favorable changes in nursery care. The year 2011 was the beginning of the government programme *Maluch* (from 2017 – *Maluch plus*) (*Act of 4 February 2011 on care for children aged up to 3 years*, consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2023, item 204), the aim of which is to support the development of institutions providing care for children aged up to 3 years: nurseries, children's clubs and day carers. Beneficiaries of the program can receive funding for the establishment and operation of care places. The program is aimed at increasing the spatial and financial accessibility of institutional care for all children, including those with special developmental needs.

The *Maluch* and *Maluch plus* programs have led to a significant increase in the supply of institutional care places for a young child. At the end of 2022, there were more than 7.000 such institutions, including more than 4.400 nurseries. In addition, other alternative “intimate” forms of care have been established and developed, although not without obstacles²⁵: children's clubs and day carers. In addition, there were 42 company nurseries in 2022.

Demand for non-family care services has gradually been met to an increasing extent, but at the end of 2022, in 841 municipalities (i.e. about 34% of all municipalities in Poland), local governments declared that about 62.500 more care places were needed, including 55.700 places in nurseries. Thus the deficit is still significant, and furthermore “it cannot be ruled out that the aforementioned figures are understated in those municipalities where no child care institution for children under 3 years of age is functioning. Municipalities, for economic reasons, do not want to report the demand (...), as they do not have sufficient financial resources to meet the social needs in this respect”²⁶.

Table 3. *Facility and places for children aged up to 3 years in 2011–2022*

Year	Facility				Places			
	Total	Nurseries	Children's clubs	Day Carers	Total	Nurseries	Children's clubs	Day Carers
2011	571	523	48	0	32 053	31 844	209	0
2012	926	791	105	30	39 967	39 236	652	79
2013	1 511	1 243	212	56	56 042	53 032	2 890	120
2014	2 493	1 667	384	442	71 386	65 081	5 764	541
2015	2 990	1 967	453	570	83 960	75 756	7 389	815
2016	3 451	2 272	515	664	95 419	86 185	8 332	902
2017	4 271	2 616	629	1 026	111 348	99 255	10 756	1 337
2018	5 080	3 155	676	1 249	144 922	126 592	11 871	6 459
2019	5 982	3 671	733	1 578	172 208	149 388	13 545	9 275
2020	6 356	3 985	795	1 576	189 269	164 843	14 982	9 444
2021	6 738	4 270	831	1 637	212 930	183 794	17 375	11 761
2022	7 452	4 494	890	2 068	222 184	191 833	17 540	12 811

Source: *Reports on the performance of tasks related to childcare for children up to 3 years of age in 2011–2022*. Reports from 2011 and 2012 do not include the number of places in non-public entities.

²³ Unfortunately, there is no information on the number of such entities or the number of users. The popularity of this solution can be discussed on the basis of data from studies on forms of supporting work-family balance by employers.

²⁴ *Informacja na temat funkcjonowania żłobków w latach 2001–2011*.

²⁵ KPRP, *Jak wspierać*.

²⁶ *Sprawozdania z wykonywania zadań z zakresu opieki nad dziećmi w wieku do lat 3 w latach 2011–2022* [Reports on the performance of tasks in the field of care for children aged up to 3 years in 2011–2022] (Warszawa: MPiPS/MRiPS).

Table 4. *Changes in access to nurseries between 2011 and 2021*

Specification	2011	2015	2011 = 100	2020	2015 = 100	2021	2020 = 100
Facility	523	1874	358,3	3831	204,4	4494	117,3
– of which public:	377	556	147,5	974	175,2	1090	112,0
Places in nurseries in thous.	36,7	75,8	206,5	164,8	217,4	191,8	116,4
– of which public:	33,6	74,7	222,3	159,8	213,9	176,0	110,1
Children staying in nurseries (during the year) in thous.	61,6	109,7	178,1	211,5	192,8	235,6	111,4
Children staying in nurseries per 1000 children up to the age of 3	29,7	62,9	211,8	118,3	188,1	142,6	120,5

Source: *Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2020/2021* [Education in the 2020/2021 school year] (Warszawa-Gdańsk: GUS, 2021), 378; *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2015* [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2015] (Warszawa: GUS, 2016), 390; *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2022* [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland 2022] (Warszawa: GUS, 2023), 392.

The total increase in the number of places for care of young children in the years 2011–2021 was about 190.1 thousand. Every 5th child under 3 years of age is provided with institutional care. More than 1/3 of the places were created thanks to funds from the *Maluch Plus* program.

Expenditure on institutional care for children up to 3 years of age (in total own funds of municipalities and from the state budget) in 2018 amounted to PLN 1.438.3 million and in 2022 – PLN 2.143.8 million. A significant source of funding for the development of institutional care for young children still comes from the European Union. In the programming period 2014–2022, 396.7 million euros, i.e. about PLN 1.6 billion, were allocated for this purpose.

The development of institutional, non-family care has been accompanied in the last decade by a radical reform of the system of maternity leaves and benefits. As a result, parents can personally take care of their child for the first year of life. Thus, nurseries are mainly used for children between 1 and 3 years of age.

As noted earlier, not without significance for the demand for childcare services – including for the youngest children – was the introduction of child-rearing benefit from April 1, 2016 (as part of the government's Family 500+ Program – *Act of 11 February 2016*

on state aid in upbringing of children. i.e. Journal of Laws of 2023, item 810, 1565). Families have great freedom to decide on the purpose for which they allocate it. Thus, they gained a greater ability to decide on the choice of childcare form²⁷.

The above activities did not take place in a social vacuum.

Over the past 30 years there has been a clear division of Polish society into supporters and opponents of nursery care²⁸. Unfortunately, discussions on this topic are very often based on subjective evaluations, generalizations of individual events and individual cases. Colloquial expressions and ideological arguments are often repeated. The evaluation of nurseries includes, among others, the theme of their strong criticism as a solution with negative consequences for the development of children, their safety and family integrity. Twice (in 2011 and 2018) a nationwide initiative of nursery care opponents loudly expressed their views in an organized manner. Open letters were addressed to the Prime Minister and parliamentarians, in which doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and activists of conservative NGOs called for limiting the development (in their view, excessively favored by the government) of nursery care in favor of care provided by the mother. The letters pointed out the shortcomings of nurseries. Most of the objections concerned

²⁷ Marek Grabowski, ed., *Kryzys rodziny. Diagnostyka, rozwiązania, profilaktyka* [Family Crisis. Diagnosis, Solutions, Prevention] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości, 2019).

²⁸ Dorota Szelewa, *Polityka opieki nad małym dzieckiem: usługi edukacyjno-opiekuńcze a instrumenty pieniężne* [Care policy for a small child: educational and care services versus monetary instruments], accessed 16.11.2023, http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Forum%20Idei/Internet_Polityka%20opieki%20nad%20malym%20dzieckiem.pdf.

low standards of care (which is not confirmed by current standards and general practices) and relatively high costs. It was emphasized that “there are still no solutions supporting parents who want to raise their offspring on their own” and the state does not support economically the most beneficial solution from the point of view of the child’s development²⁹. Promotion of parental care was opposed to the development of nurseries. The letters revealed their image as a dehumanized institution, indoctrinating, deforming children’s psyche and threatening their physical health³⁰.

The response to the second letter was a public debate supported by expert opinion, refuting the accusations against nursery care³¹. It is difficult to assess how the further process of supporting the care of young children in the Polish family policy will proceed. However, it seems worth quoting the opinions on nurseries of the third, important group of stakeholders in this policy: parents who use nursery services and have their own observations and views on their evaluation. This element should not be overlooked when defining the directions and shaping the principles of family policy.

Are the arguments “for and against” nurseries that have most clearly marked the public debate on this form of care for young children also the arguments that the parents of these children give? Why do they or do they not use these facilities? What encourages them and what discourages them? What expectations

do they have of nurseries that are not met by these institutions?

Obtaining arguments for the discussion on nurseries from parents directly interested in the problem was the main goal of empirical research³², the fragment of which is presented below.

Nursery care – opinions of young children’s parents who use their services

Why do parents use the services of nurseries?

The results of empirical studies in which the respondents were, among others, parents of young children using the services of nurseries, confirmed the strong relationship between the use of this form of care and the economic activity of parents, especially mothers. The decision to place a child in a nursery was most often a result of the parent-caregiver returning to work. This is by far the dominant reason.

The decision to place a child in a nursery was also made by parents starting work for the first time and those looking for a job. However, the number of such parents was significantly lower, among other reasons due to the fact that with a shortage of places in nurseries some public institutions give preference to children of parents who are already working.

Relatively often parents justified the use of nursery with the need for rest after a period

²⁹ *List otwarty w sprawie opieki nad dziećmi do lat 3. [Open letter on child care for children under 3 years of age]*, accessed 16.11.2023, <https://ekai.pl/dokumenty/list-otwarty-w-sprawie-opieki-nad-dziecmi-dolat-3/>.

³⁰ Tymoteusz Zych, Karolina Dobrowolska, Olaf Szczypiński, eds., *Jakiej polityki rodzinnej potrzebuje Polska? [What family policy – does Poland need?]* (Warszawa: Fundacja Instytut Kultury Prawnej Ordo Iuris, 2015). Magdalena Olek, *W drodze do lepszego modelu opieki nad małymi dziećmi [On the way to a better model of care for young children]* (Warszawa: Fundacja Instytut Kultury Prawnej Ordo Iuris, 2020).

³¹ Szelewa, *Polityka*.

³² In 2017, as part of a grant from the National Science Centre (project no. 2015/17/D/HS5/02565), a representative, nationwide survey was carried out on parents’ opinions, needs and preferences regarding different forms of care for a child under 3. The research (CAPI) covered 1502 people, of whom 500 parents used the services of nurseries (including 56% of non-public facilities). All parents were asked questions about the reasons for using the current form of care for their young child. All parents were also asked to point out advantages and disadvantages of each form of care. The research results were described in the author’s publication entitled *Mom, Nanny or Nursery? Preferences, opinions and needs of parents concerning various forms of care for a young child* (Dorota Głogosz, *Mama, niania czy żłobek? Preferencje, opinie i potrzeby rodziców dotyczące różnych form opieki nad małym dzieckiem [Mom, Nanny or Nursery? Preferences, opinions and needs of parents concerning various forms of care for a young child]*, accessed 20.02.2023, <https://www.ipiss.com.pl/aktualnosci/mama-niania-czy-zlobek-opinie-potrzeby-i-preferencje-rodzicow-dotyczace-form-opieki-nad-malym-dzieckiem-w-polsce-dorota-glogosz.pdf>). The article makes use of a small portion of the research information that is presented in this report.

Box 1. Why do parents use the services of nurseries? (n = 500; multiple choice)

- mother returning to work (87,0%)
- father's return to work (13,8%)
- taking up a job – first or subsequent (6,9%)
- looking for a job – first or next (2,0%)
- return to study (3,6%)
- need to rest from caring responsibilities (8,3%)
- the need for help in combining care for a small child and its siblings (3,4%)
- other situation (4,2%)

– in which lack of money to finance childcare in the current form (0,4%)

Source: Dorota Głogosz, *Mama, niania czy żłobek? Preferencje, opinie i potrzeby rodziców dotyczące różnych form opieki nad małym dzieckiem [Mom, Nanny or Nursery? Preferences, opinions and needs of parents concerning various forms of care for a young child]*, accessed 20.02.2023, <https://www.wipiss.com.pl/aktualnosci/mama-niania-czy-zlobek-opinie-potrzeby-i-preferencje-rodzicow-dotyczace-form-opieki-nad-malym-dzieckiem-w-polsce-dorota-glogosz.pdf>.

of intensive personal care for the child. Such a reason coincided mainly (Spearman's correlation coefficient – .84) with the mothers' return to professional work and concerned parents with more than one dependent child under 6 years of age (correlation coefficient .63). Nursery services were also helpful in continuing education interrupted by the birth of a child and a period of personal childcare.

Nurseries also proved to be, albeit to a limited extent, a support solution for parents who, in addition to their nursery-aged child (in the study, these were children 1–3 years old), also had younger children and/or children with special needs to whom they had to focus their attention.

Other situations determining the use of nurseries were, e.g., the desire to provide the child with peer contact or professional support for the child's development. These motives were indicated mainly by parents of slightly older children (at least 2 years old), but also by parents of children with developmental dysfunctions, who were few in the study. This reason was particularly important for families living in large and very large cities (correlation coefficient .55).

It is also worth noting the small group of parents who decided to use the nursery due to lack of resources for the previous form of care, most often provided by single parents (correlation coefficient .60). They also constituted the majority among parents declaring at the same time that they were using the nursery in order to be able to work.

Availability of childcare places in a nursery

Less than half of the respondents did not have any problems in finding a nursery care for their child. For the remainder (55%), the barriers were of various types. Most often, they resulted from lack of a nursery in the vicinity of their residence (in rural areas this problem was encountered by more than half of respondents) or lack of free places in existing facilities.

Box 2. Problems with finding care in nurseries (n = 276)

- no places in the nearest nurseries (41,1%)
- no nursery close to home / work (17,8%)
- available nursery was too expensive (10,0%)
- did not suit me in terms of the number of children (1,0%)
- did not suit me in terms of educational offer (1,0%)
- did not suit me in terms of location (0,6%)
- did not suit me in terms of payment rules (0,6%)
- did not suit me in terms of operating hours (0,2%)

Source: Dorota Głogosz, *Mama, niania czy żłobek?*

The children of 40% of the parents were enrolled on a waiting list for a nursery place. In case of those using public facilities every second child was on a waiting list (54.2%), but also in non-public facilities almost 1/3 of children (29.9%) who finally found a place there, were waiting for such a place.

The waiting period was usually 3 months, but every fifth parent waited a year or longer for a place in the nursery for their child.

The acutely felt shortage of places in nurseries pushes all other expectations of parents as to the conditions offered in these facilities into the background. However, this does not mean that they are unimportant to parents. They looked for facilities with a small number of children and a specific offer of additional activities. It was also important for the nursery to be close to home or workplace, or at least on the route between these locations.

Given the not inconsiderable costs of a stay in a nursery, some looked for facilities where parents were reimbursed for the time their child was absent. A few only looked for facilities whose hours of operation would meet their needs, resulting mainly from their working hours,

but also, e.g., care arrangements for other children. They were mainly looking for facilities open longer than 5 p.m., as this is unfortunately an unwritten standard in a significant number of nurseries, including non-public ones.

Advantages of nursery care

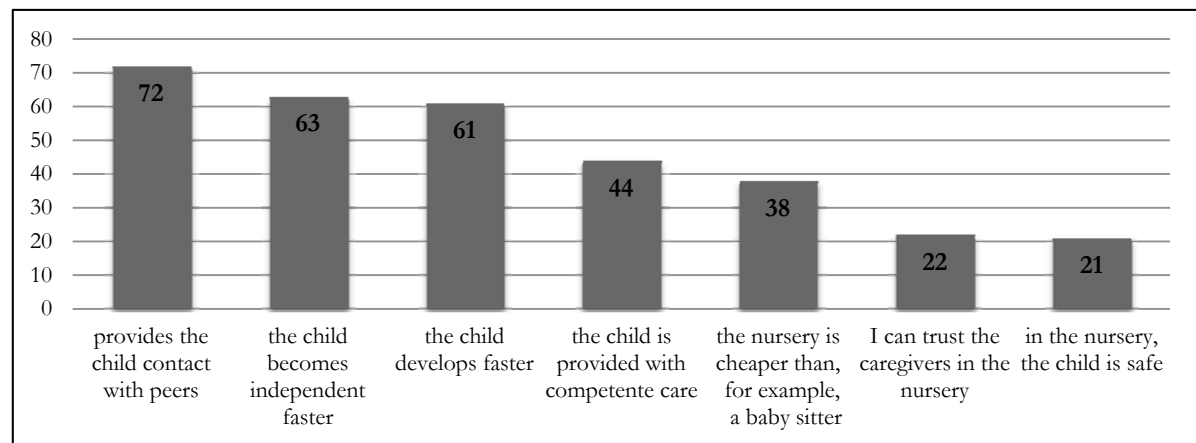
The three most frequently cited advantages of this form of care for a young child by parents who use a nursery care institution are as follows:

- providing the child contact with peers,
- quicker independence for the child,
- faster psychophysical development of the child.

For most parents, the advantage of nurseries is that children learn to take care of themselves faster there than at home. They also gain more stimuli that stimulate their professional development, e.g. they walk faster on their own, have richer vocabulary, learn how to function in a group, develop skills and interests during classes conducted by specialists trained in working with children. Parents also indicated that in the nursery the children get to know the environment faster (e.g., thanks to visits of interesting guests).

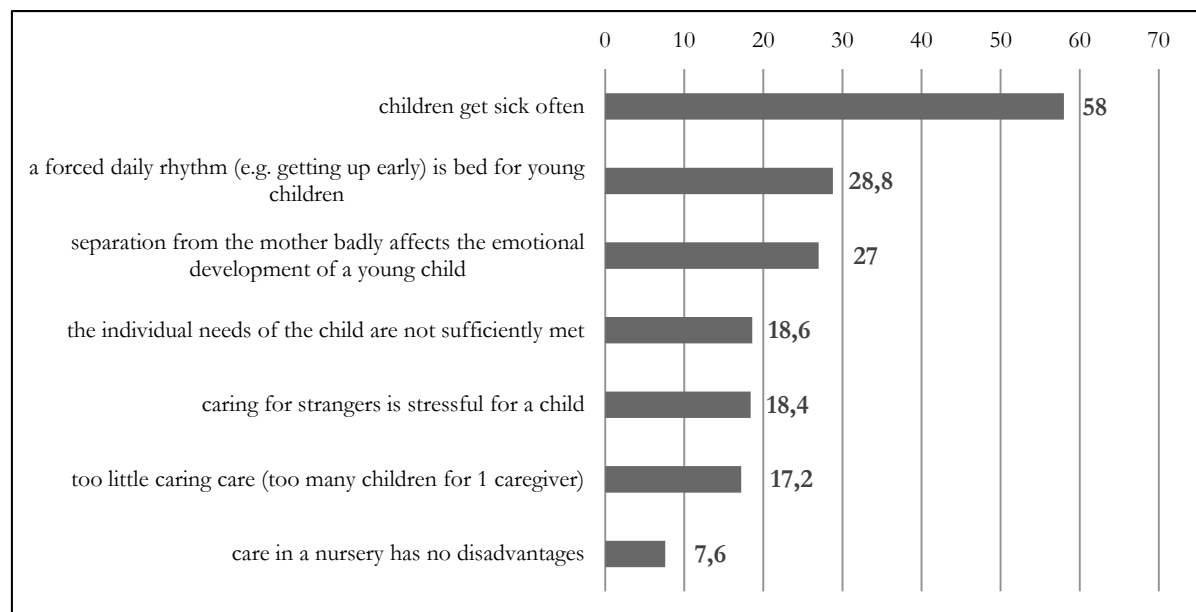
Parents also indicated that the nursery provides competent care, caretakers can be trusted and the child is safe there. These are – as is

Figure 1. *Advantages of nursery care (opinions of parents using this form of care – %, multiple choice), n = 500*



Source: Glogosz, *Mama, niania czy żłobek?*

Figure 2. *Disadvantages of nursery care (opinions of parents using this form of care – %, multiple choice), n = 500*



Source: Glogosz, *Mama, niania czy żłobek?*

evident from the ongoing social discussion – issues that arouse a lot of emotion among parents. Therefore, they are addressed below when evaluating the disadvantages of this form of care.

More than one-third of parents believed that nursery care is cheaper than other forms. Interestingly, the costs of care in a non-public facility were compared with care provided by parents and the salaries of parents who were able to work thanks to using the nursery were also taken into account.

Disadvantages of nursery care

Parents using nurseries indicated that even very professional care in these institutions that meets all formal standards has disadvantages.

The main disadvantage is the frequent illness of children. This is a serious problem that results in working parents having to take time off to care for their sick child and an unfavorable perception of parents' use of this entitlement. A significant disadvantage of nurseries was also the necessity to adjust the child's daily schedule to the work organization of both parents and institution. Parents using nurseries also perceived a negative impact of separation from the mother on the emotional development of a young child. In the opinions of some psychologists and psychiatrists, this is a strongly emphasized disadvantage of nursery care. Moreover, some parents also had reservations about ensuring the possibility of proper – including sufficiently individualized – care for the child in the institution. They indicated that the facilities are too large and the groups too numerous, which compromises the quality of care and raises concerns about child safety³³.

For parents using nurseries, this form of care was not always the ideal solution, and

more often the optimal one. However, 7% of parents do not see any disadvantages of nursery care. This applies to both public and non-public facilities. Such opinions were reported only by parents who already had experience with nurseries, as their older children were also in them.

Resignation terms for nursery care

Could parents' experiences of using nurseries and their disadvantages cause them to abandon the services of these institutions if they had alternative options?

The majority of parents (60%) would not change anything even if they had other care options, but the remainder would be willing to choose a private to public nursery (high costs) or vice versa: from public to private (quality of care and offer of extracurricular activities).

Among parents allowing for a change in the form of care, 31% would resign from a nursery if a family member could take care of the child, and 38% were ready to resign but only on the condition that they could take care of the child personally. On the other hand, if the child could be taken care of by a nanny, 11% of parents would give up the nursery. Willingness to resign from a nursery was positively correlated primarily with indications that children in nurseries are often ill (correlation coefficient 0.6).

Other parents willing to give up the nursery conditioned such a move on:

- more help from the other parent and/or other family members;
- employer's friendly attitude to the problems of combining work and childcare;
- adaptation of working hours to family responsibilities;
- possibility of remote work and part-time work.

³³ Polish standards concerning the number of children per 1 caretaker are not lower than, e.g. in France. Also the sanitary and construction standards in Poland are among the highest in Europe (Dorota Głogosz, „Organizacja i funkcjonowanie pozarodzinnej opieki nad dziećmi w krajach UE. Kierunki zmian” [„Organization and functioning of non-family childcare in EU countries. Directions of change”], In: *Kierunki zmian w systemie instytucjonalnej opieki nad dzieckiem w Polsce [Directions of change in the system of institutional childcare in Poland]*, ed. Cecylia Sadowska-Snarska (Białystok: WSE w Białymstoku, 2008); Piotr Szukalski, „System opieki nad małym dzieckiem w współczesnej Francji” [„The childcare system in modern France”], In: *Kierunki zmian w systemie instytucjonalnej opieki nad dzieckiem w Polsce [Directions of change in the system of institutional childcare in Poland]*, ed. Cecylia Sadowska-Snarska (Białystok: WSE w Białymstoku, 2008, 91–99). See: Ordinance Minister of Family And Social Policy of September 19, 2023 on standards of care for children under 3 years of age, Journal of Laws of 2023, item 2121.

Conclusion

The availability of nursery care has increased significantly over the past three decades. And despite the concerns of some stakeholders, the rate of growth in the number of facilities and places has not slowed. While in 2015 there were 9 children per 1 childcare place for the youngest children (under 3 years old), in 2021 there will be – 4 children. The improvement is clear, although according to data from the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, as of January 19, 2023, there is still not a single care facility for a young child in more than 1100 municipalities.

Thus, the statistics on quantitative changes in nursery care do not support the thesis of variability of family policy priorities of successive governments (corresponding to different policy options) with regard to these very institutions and their development. Sweats to the point of being in line with their own priorities.

By the end of 2021, in reports submitted by municipalities and non-public institutions, about 31% of all municipalities in Poland declared the need for new care places – identifying this need as a total of about 70,700 places, of which about 60,100 places in nurseries. More than a third of the municipalities that have declared the need for new care places are rural municipalities. Meanwhile, the continuation of the government's Maluch Plus program in 2022 has not been announced, as no EU funds have been obtained for its implementation (funds were planned in the National Reconstruction Program, which was not launched). In 2023, the program – significantly reduced – was started in the second half of the year. Such changes do not positively affect the efficiency and effectiveness of family policy. At issue are both macroscale results – for the entire state and society – meso-scale results – which include issues of trust and sustainability of the rules of cooperation between various family policy actors – and micro-scale results – which are expressed in a sense of social security for families.

An effective and efficient family policy requires that its goals, principles and solutions also take into account the real needs of fami-

lies, which are highly diverse and often contradictory. In extreme situations, instruments and actions which are desirable for some families may be unacceptable for others. Therefore, it is important to implement alternative solutions and shape access to them by applying criteria that will provide families with optimal autonomy of choices. At the same time, negative opinions about nurseries must not lead to the withdrawal of the government or local governments from the policy of supporting the development and functioning of this form of care, or even to limiting support in this scope. In fact, official government reports indicate that demand for nursery services is still much higher than supply. Moreover, the data here is understated by local governments, which do not want to bear the costs of running these institutions.

Research indicates that parents' preferences regarding the form of childcare are shaped mainly by the current needs of a given family resulting from its individual socio-demographic characteristics. The material family situation, professional status of parents, household composition, preferred and realized family model, but also the place of the child, parental duties and professional work of parents (especially women-mothers) in the individually recognized system of values are very important in this respect. Parents are also aware that each form of childcare has its advantages and disadvantages. Therefore, when their individual situation does not allow the use of what they consider to be the most advantageous solution, the use of a nursery is a second choice for the majority of parents. This is why this alternative is so important for the effectiveness and efficiency of family policy.

Nursery care for a young child has disadvantages, which are also noticed by parents using this solution. However, according to the principles of public policy implementation, this cannot constitute an argument justifying the inhibition of nursery care development in Poland. It is impossible to claim that Poland is beginning to build a new system of support for families' care functions. This process is already underway. Therefore, it should be subject to monitoring (not only "statistical," but also much broader qualitative evaluation) and ex ante eva-

luation³⁴. Signals of irregularities indicated by parents of young children, particularly those who use nurseries, provide an objective answer to the basic questions of such an evaluation: what works and what doesn't?³⁵

The results of representative nationwide research, presented briefly in the text, concerning among others the opinions of parents of young children about various forms of child-care indicate that for most families the nursery is not the most desirable choice³⁶. It is usually a "second choice" solution. Only one in five respondents considered a day nursery to be the most advantageous form of care for their child.

The most frequently cited disadvantage of nursery care is the frequent illness of children. This is a serious problem noted by both supporters and opponents of these institutions. However, it is usually not due to the quality of the care. The problem of frequent illness of children in nurseries has medical aspects that are beyond the author's ability to evaluate. It also has another context related to the professional activity of the parents. The child's illness leads to the need for working parents to take time off to care for the child. Working parents are then under strong pressure from employers and colleagues to reduce their absences for this reason. Under this pressure, they also bring children with symptoms of illness to the nursery, causing both the child to become ill and other children in the centre to become infected. In many nurseries, in order to protect against such situations, regulations specify the time at which a parent of a child with symptoms of illness is obliged to collect

the child from the centre. Until that time, the child is isolated from his or her peers. The child may only return to the nursery on presentation of a doctor's certificate stating that the child is healthy.

The right to care for a sick child (60 days per year combined for the mother and father of the child) is a labor right that is intended to protect the employment of parents, and the exercise of this right cannot be a reason for discrimination or harassment. Therefore, the source of this accusation against nursery care lies outside the institution's functioning and the possibilities of eliminating the problem should not be sought there.

Another of the frequently mentioned disadvantages of a nursery is the necessity to adjust the child's daily schedule to the work organization of the institution and parents. However, parents pointed out that such adjustment is mainly the problem of adaptation period³⁷, which can be alleviated by adapting the child's daily schedule at home to the one in force in the institution. A consistent daily routine allows the whole family to function more efficiently. On the other hand, the need for the child to get up early or to have a rest (sleep) after lunch can be solved by the flexibility and individualization of the child's schedule, which is highly valued by parents. Part of the solution to this problem lies with the labour market and the use of opportunities for flexible work organization and flexible working hours. There is certainly much to be done here as well³⁸.

In the public discussion on nurseries their opponents pointed to the negative impact of separation from the mother on the emotional

³⁴ Marcin Sakowicz, „Analiza polityki publicznej z wykorzystaniem modelu cyklu działań publicznych jako narzędzia poprawy jakości działania we współczesnym państwie” [„Analysis of public policy using the model of public action cycle as a tool for improving the quality of action in the modern state”], In: *Polityka publiczna, Teoria. Jakość. Dobre praktyki* [Public Policy. Theory. Quality. Good practices] (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, 2016), 51–54.

³⁵ Sakowicz, *Analiza*, 53.

³⁶ Such a choice turned out to be care provided personally by both parents together, interchangeably. It was preferred by 60% of parents of young children; regardless of the form of custody currently used (see: Głogosz, *Mama*).

³⁷ Institutions are increasingly using a special adaptation period to gradually accustom the child to the new environment, with a flexible length of stay, with the possibility of remaining with the parent during this time.

³⁸ Cecylia Sadowska-Snarska, „Koncepcja równowagi praca – życie w kontekście zmian zachodzących w sferze ekonomicznej i społecznej” [„The concept of work-life balance in the context of ongoing changes in the economic and social sphere”], In: *Relacje praca – życie pozazawodowe drogą do zrównoważonego rozwoju jednostki* [Work-non-work life relations as a path to sustainable development of the individual], ed. Renata Tomaszewska-Lipiec (Bydgoszcz: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, 2014).

development of a young child, supporting opinions of psychologists and psychiatrists. However, in the light of research presented here, the problem seems more often to be a matter of concern than a real situation: parents using nurseries indicated such a disadvantage of the nursery far less frequently than those using other forms of care. They also indicated that it was primarily a problem of the adaptation period, when the child requires special attention and quick responses to disturbing behaviors. In order to increase the influence of parents on the quality of care in nurseries, from January 1, 2018, it was made possible to establish parents' councils, which have the opportunity to review a certain range of conditions and rules of institution functioning.

Other disadvantage of the nursery mentioned by parents is the limited possibility to individualize child care. Parents using these facilities indicated that they are too large and the groups too numerous, which worsens the quality of care and raises concerns about child safety. Unfortunately, despite the concerns signaled by parents, in 2022 statutory changes were implemented dictated by "reducing the cost of institution functioning," allowing easier organization and operation of these institutions by different entities³⁹. As a result, very large institutions are being built. Despite maintaining standards for the number of staff, they do not induce parents to use nurseries.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the current public debate on nurseries does not sufficiently take into account the real needs of parents with young children. The media, available to various sides of this discussion, often reproduce unverified facts, which leads to generalizations of individual cases and distorts the situation. There is insufficient

ongoing monitoring of government and local government programs in family policy regarding care for the young child, which is limited in its scope to statistical analysis and financial evaluation (expenditures). In this situation, the recurring initiatives of criticizing nurseries are disturbing to the extent that they indicate the necessity (due to the defects of this care) of stopping their quantitative development, completely disregarding – where the accusations turn out to be proven – the possibility of eliminating the causes of problem. The reasons, as indicated, often lie in other areas of social policy and should be solved there. This statement fits perfectly into the concept of public policy sciences, which includes the assumption of multidisciplinary actions⁴⁰.

The decisions of family policy makers and implementers in the area of supporting the family's care function (the supply side of nursery care) are confronted with the opinions and decisions of parents regarding the use of these services (the demand side). Significant improvements – generally on a national scale – in the spatial and price availability of nursery services entail the need to implement changes of a qualitative nature. Parents' expectations are clear⁴¹. They are looking not so much for a place in a nursery facility, but for a place in a facility that meets their specific expectations; for example, regarding the location of the nursery facility, its size, educational offer, flexible organization of service hours, and others. These changes (which are visible but rather slow⁴²) are certainly facilitated by the demographic situation: the decreasing number of born children. However, it is difficult to expect that the lower demand for nursery services will significantly accelerate or intensify the qualitative changes demanded by parents. This is because

³⁹ *Sprawozdania z wykonywania zadań z zakresu opieki nad dziećmi w wieku do lat 3 w latach 2011–2022* [Reports on the performance of tasks in the field of care for children aged up to 3 years in 2011–2022] (Warszawa: MPiPS/MRiPS, 2023): 13–14.

⁴⁰ Joachim Osipiński, „Anatomia sfery publicznej i przestrzeni publicznej a kształtowanie polityki publicznej w państwie” [„Anatomy of the public sphere and public space and the formation of public policy in the state”], In: *Polityka publiczna, Teoria. Jakość. Dobre praktyki* [Public Policy. Theory. Quality. Good practices] (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza SGH, 2016), 11–38.

⁴¹ Marek Grabowski, ed., *Kryzys rodziny. Diagnoza, rozwiązania, profilaktyka* [Family Crisis. Diagnosis, Solutions, Prevention] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości, 2019), 138–170.

⁴² Monika Sobkowiak, „Dokąd zmierza przedszkole? Dobre praktyki nastawione na rozwijanie kompetencji XXI wiek” [„Where is the kindergarten going? Good practices focused on developing 21st century competences”], *Humanities and Cultural Studies* No. 3(2) (2022): 151–161, <https://doi.org/10.55225/hcs.400>.

such changes are associated with costs⁴³. Their increase will be viewed with caution both by supporters of liberal or neoliberal solutions (generally opting for a reduction in social spending)

and by supporters of the conservative trend (emphasizing that the optimal and cheapest form of child care is care provided by the mother).

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⁴³ Patrycja Guzikowska, „Polityka pronatalistyczna w świetle katolickiej nauki społecznej”, *Fides, Ratio Et Patria. Studia Toruńskie* No. 16 (2023): 49–71, <https://doi.org/10.56583/frp.2046>.

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