Raising Children Is Work

The Dutch Childcare Financing Act, eighteen years of formalisation, and the case for allocating care by vocation

J. Konstapel, Leiden, 10 November 2026

Summary

The Netherlands will spend nearly €9 billion a year from 2029 to make childcare almost free for working parents. The Council of State supports the payment method but doubts the social return.

This essay argues that the debate rests on an unstated choice: only paid work counts as work. Raising children is work by the international definition. Dutch law pays for it only after it has been formalised.

The essay shows that a spiral of formalisation, described by the author in 2008, has run its predicted course. It compares the principles behind other countries' systems. It ends with the design principles of a guild that allocates work by vocation, and three hypotheses by which that design can be tested.

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1. The occasion

On 9 November 2026 the Council of State published its advice on the Childcare Financing Act. From 2029 the state will pay 95.6% of the hourly price of childcare, up to a statutory maximum, directly to childcare organisations. Eligibility no longer depends on income. It does depend on the work requirement: a parent must be employed, in education, or in a programme leading to work.

The additional cost is about €3.7 billion a year. Total public spending on childcare will reach nearly €9 billion.

The Council supports direct payment, because it ends the claw-backs from parents that produced the childcare benefits scandal. Its other findings are critical. The government itself expects almost no increase in labour participation. Demand is expected to rise by 23%, mainly because parents will replace care by grandparents with formal childcare. In a sector that already lacks staff and premises, this will push prices up and reduce access for low-income families. The Council also questions the one-year test period and the state-aid construction, and recommends reconsidering the work requirement.

On the same day 35 organisations, including the main trade unions, the association of municipalities and the education councils, asked the government to proceed without delay. Their letter does not address the Council's criticisms.

The financial newspaper that reported the advice also reported that a quarter of employers still face staff shortages, and that nearly half of young care workers are considering leaving the sector. These reports belong to the same subject.

2. Raising children is work

Since 2013 the International Labour Organization has defined work as any activity that produces goods or services for others or for one's own use. Unpaid care for one's own children falls under this definition as own-use production work.

This work is excluded from the national accounts. It does not appear in gross domestic product, but it is work.

A Dutch estimate from 2023 values the unpaid care of children at about €15 billion a year. The method can be debated. The order of magnitude shows that the unpaid work exceeds the €9 billion the state will spend on the paid form.

3. What Dutch law counts as work

Dutch law follows the national accounts rather than the ILO. Under the work requirement, a parent raising his own children or a grandparent caring for grandchildren is not working. The law does not state this as a choice. It follows from the definition of the requirement.

The law pays parents and grandparents only after the work has been formalised. A grandparent can be paid as a registered childminder, which requires a recognised diploma, a first-aid certificate, a certificate of good conduct and registration with an agency. A parent can be paid for youth care to his own child through a personal budget, but only with a formal youth-care referral. Nine weeks of paid parental leave compensate lost wages, not the work of raising a child.

The child benefit does not change this. It was introduced in 1939 as insurance against the costs of children, as support for a social good, and as population policy. It is now a contribution to the costs of a child, paid regardless of who does the work.

4. The 2008 analysis

In June 2008 the author published “Why We Need a Recession to Move to a Social Society”. It described a sequence. A tax benefit for accredited childcare creates high demand. High demand creates a shortage of certified staff and a budget problem. The response is more formal structure: norms, buildings, managers, supervisors and administration.

The essay observed that formalisation changes who is considered competent. “When childcare was not formalized everybody was qualified to raise children.” Once norms are written down, parents are divided into the educated and the not-educated. The discussion then leads to a new institution for parents considered unable to raise their children.

It also noted that people without paid work are required to work elsewhere and therefore cannot care for their own children. It argued that paid relationships replace long-term reciprocity, and suggested that the state might pay parents to raise their own children. It concluded that a recession would be needed to reduce formal activity.

5. The record since 2008

The predicted sequence occurred. Between 2005 and 2009 the number of children in formal childcare rose from about 375,000 to about 800,000. The budget of about €1.6

billion was projected to reach €3.0 billion by 2011. The government responded with stricter rules for childminders and lower benefit rates.

The workforce grew from about 78,000 in 2015 to nearly 127,000 in 2025. Annual inflow doubled to about 20,000, but annual outflow rose to 14,000. The sector still lacks nearly 7,000 staff. Spending on the childcare benefit is €5.9 billion in 2026 and will rise to nearly €9 billion.

The new institution also appeared. In 2025, 477,500 young people, 10.8% of everyone under 23, received youth care. Municipal costs were about €4 billion in 2018 and are projected at €10 billion in 2028. In 2023 the responsible state secretary said that doubts belong to growing up, and that a generation in professional care should not be the aim.

The proposed remedy did not hold. The recession came, and cuts followed. Between 2012 and 2014 childcare use fell by 8.6%. The labour participation of single mothers fell from 60.1% to 56.2%. No one measured whether informal help increased. When the economy recovered, the spiral resumed. A recession slowed formalisation but did not change the principle behind it.

6. What the diploma delivers

If formalisation produced better care, its cost could be justified. The available evidence does not show that the formal requirement is what makes care effective.

A Dutch review of youth-care research found little association between professionals' characteristics, including education and experience, and outcomes. What mattered was how professionals behaved in the relationship with child and parents.

In childcare, the national quality monitor rates emotional quality as good and educational quality as moderate, without linking either to qualifications. Dutch research on early-childhood organisations notes that support from colleagues and learning on the job relate more strongly to quality than formal standards.

A diploma certifies knowledge about raising children. It does not certify the ability to do it.

7. A shortage of fit, not of people

The labour market has loosened. In the third quarter of 2026 there were 92 vacancies per 100 unemployed, against 142 in 2022. Yet the share of employers reporting shortages has barely fallen. Healthcare alone has about 68,500 open vacancies. A large share of young care workers consider leaving, a pattern already visible in surveys from 2021 and 2024.

If the problem were a lack of people, a looser labour market would ease it. It does not. A more consistent explanation is a lack of fit between people and work.

A grandparent who cares for grandchildren because it suits her, and a young care worker who leaves a job she entered through a qualification, illustrate the same mismatch. The system allocates work by certificate, not by vocation.

8. Principles in other countries

Other countries make different choices. The differences lie in principles more than in amounts.

Country	Principle	Practice
Sweden	The state relieves the individual of dependence on family	Universal childcare; home-care allowance abolished in 2016
Germany	Family care supported, then reversed	Care allowance of €150/month (2013–2015), struck down by the court
Finland	Choice between daycare and home care	€378/month for home care; relatives may care until 2027

Country	Principle	Practice
Norway	Choice for toddlers	Cash benefit for children aged 13–19 months outside daycare
Hungary	Care by grandparents as work	70% of the grandparent's wage, with pension accrual
China	Care within the extended family	Grandparents raise a large share of young children

Comparative research places the Netherlands on a path of partial de-familialisation. Care has moved out of the family without a clear decision on how far.

Anthropological work by Sarah Hrdy shows that humans have always raised children in networks of kin and group members. Shared care is the historical norm.

The common feature of all current systems is that care is tied either to a diploma and an institution, or to family membership. None ties it to the vocation of the person who does the work.

9. Stacked principles and circulating money

Sweden applies one principle consistently. The Netherlands combines five: paid work as a condition, the household as the unit of account, redistribution by income, the market as provider, and the state as supervisor. Each principle requires its own rules. Each layer moves money between citizens and the state.

In 2016 economists of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis described this circulation of tax money through benefits as inefficient. The new act adds another layer. Because public money will flow directly to private providers, the sector falls under European state-aid rules, with profit limits and recovery of overcompensation.

Several trade-offs are made without being stated. A tax credit for working parents is phased out in exchange for nearly free childcare. Care by grandparents is replaced by paid care. Simplicity for parents is exchanged for complex obligations for providers. The decision to count only paid work as work is not written down; it follows from a definition. Choices that are not explicit cannot be openly debated.

10. Design principles for a guild based on vocation

The author is developing a professional community in the form of a guild. It is a prototype in development, and its design changes with use. Its principles are:

Personal ownership. Each person has an address that records skills, interests, completed work and next steps. It belongs to the person.

Direction by vocation. A personal blueprint indicates talent and vocation. It is visible only to the person and guides the direction of work.

Transfer by masters. Experienced people, including those over 65, can propose to pass on their craft to younger people. The younger person decides.

Self-reported load. Workers report their own load. Nothing is measured by camera or sensor. A worker at risk of leaving can say so and be shown better-fitting work.

Honest gaps. When no suitable person is available, the guild reports a gap and its reason. It does not create artificial matches.

Human decisions. Calculations support decisions; people make them. Placement requires the consent of all parties.

Recorded deeds. Within family and neighbourhood, help is recorded by the person who gives it and confirmed by the person who receives it. No money is needed inside this circle.

In this design, raising children is a craft. Grandparents and experienced parents act as masters; families are clients. One boundary must remain explicit: paid care for other people’s children falls under childcare law, care within family and circle does not.

11. Hypotheses for testing

The design is a claim until tested. Three hypotheses follow.

Retention. People placed by vocation remain in their work longer than people placed by qualification.

Relationship quality. Clients rate the relationship with people placed by vocation higher.

Visible volume. Recording deeds within family and neighbourhood makes the amount of child-raising work outside formal childcare measurable for the first time.

If the first two hypotheses fail, the explanation of the shortage as a problem of fit is wrong. The third provides a figure that is absent from the current debate.

12. Conclusion

The 2008 analysis of formalisation has been confirmed by eighteen years of data. Its proposed remedy, a recession, has not.

The alternative is an explicit choice: to recognise raising children as work regardless of who performs it, and to allocate work by vocation rather than by certificate. Whether that choice delivers better results can be established in practice.

Annotated References

The occasion

Council of State (2026). *Advice on the Childcare Financing Act*, W12.26.00301/III, adopted 4 November, published 9 November 2026. Full text via Kinderopvang-Wijzer.

The formal advice of the government's main legislative adviser, source of the figures in section 1. The full text also covers the state-aid construction, supervision, fraud risks

and the civil-law aspects of the new childcare contracts, for readers who want to follow the legal design in detail.

FNV, CNV, VNG et al. (2026). *Broad social support for the new childcare financing system*, letter to the Minister of Work and Participation and the House of Representatives, 9 November 2026.

A joint letter from 35 organisations in labour, local government, education, care and parent representation. The list of signatories shows which parts of civil society support the act; comparing it with earlier joint letters shows which organisations joined or left.

Het Financieele Dagblad (2026). “Council of State moderately positive about almost free childcare”, *FD Arbeidsmarkt*, 10 November 2026.

The newsletter that prompted this essay. It links the advice to the TNO Employers’ Survey on Labour 2026 and to an IZZ survey of young care workers; both underlying reports can be consulted for figures by sector and age group.

Work and its value

ILOSTAT. Forms of work.

The statistical definition of work adopted by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians in 2013. The page explains all five forms of work and the statistical standards behind them.

NL Times (2023). Unpaid work like informal care, raising kids worth €215 billion per year.

Report on an estimate by the Institute for Public Economics for author Lynn Berger, valuing childcare at about €15 billion a year. The report names the institute and the valuation method, a starting point for comparing other ways to value unpaid work.

Dutch law and payment

Rijksoverheid. Becoming a childminder.

Government guidance listing the requirements for registered childminders. It links to the list of recognised diplomas and to the national childcare register.

Max Vandaag (2015). Payment of grandparents under discussion.

News report on the 2015 proposal to exclude care by relatives from the childcare benefit. The parliamentary documents on childminding from 2015–2016 show how this debate developed.

Binnenlands Bestuur (2025). Minimum wage as rate for personal budget from social network allowed.

Report on the rulings of the Central Appeals Tribunal of 30 September 2025 on paying parents through a personal budget. The rulings themselves and municipal regulations on “customary care” show where the line between ordinary upbringing and paid care is drawn.

Van Praag, B.M.S. & Plug, E.J.S. (1993). Child benefit and the joy of children, *ESB*.

Economic analysis of the Dutch child benefit and its original arguments of 1939. The parliamentary debate on the Child Benefit Act of 1939 and the General Child Benefit Act of 1963 can be traced from here.

The 2008 analysis and its course

Konstapel, J. (2008). Why We Need a Recession to Move to a Social Society.

The original analysis of the formalisation of childcare summarised in section 4. The post links to related essays on vocation and on Calvinism.

Minister of Social Affairs (2010). Parliamentary letter on childcare, 11 June 2010.

Official figures on the growth of childcare after the 2005 Childcare Act. Parliamentary file 31322 contains all later letters on childcare and allows the spiral to be followed year by year.

Asscher, L.F. (2015). Parliamentary letter, 28 April 2015.

Figures on childcare use and the participation of mothers after the cuts of 2012–2014, broken down by age of child and type of household.

Minister of Work and Participation (2026). Evaluation of labour-shortage policy in childcare.

Figures on the childcare workforce since 2015 and on the measures taken against shortages, including working hours and training routes.

ESB (2026). Staff in childcare.

Article on inflow and outflow of childcare staff, with a chart of yearly flows since 2016 and references to the sector fund's labour-market reports.

UWV. Wanted: many staff in childcare.

The public employment service's analysis of the childcare labour market, with regional figures available on the same site.

PwC. Key points of the Social Affairs budget.

Summary of the Social Affairs budget, including childcare spending. The budget itself gives the multi-year series.

CPB & SCP (2023). Revision of the childcare financing system.

Joint analysis by the two planning bureaus of the effects on participation, child development and equal opportunity. It summarises the scientific literature on childcare and labour supply.

CBS (2026). Fewer young people in youth care in 2025.

National statistics on youth care by type, age and sex. CBS also publishes figures per municipality, where the share ranges from 5% to over 15%.

NOS (2024). Municipalities in financial difficulty due to rising youth-care costs.

News report on youth-care costs and municipal deficits. The reports of the association of municipalities and the Reform Agenda Youth give the underlying financial series.

NOS (2023). Too many children receive psychological help, says cabinet.

The state secretary on limiting professional youth care. The 2021 report of the Committee of Experts and the Verwey-Jonker Institute's study on referrals are cited there.

Effectiveness of qualifications

Van Hattum, M., De Greef, M. et al. (2019). Knowledge update on alliance and common factors, HAN University of Applied Sciences and Praktikon.

Review of research on what makes youth care effective, with instruments for observing professional behaviour such as the Therapist Alliance-Building Behavior Scale.

Van der Werf, W.M., Slot, P.L., Kenis, P.N. & Leseman, P.P.M. (2021). Inclusive practice and quality of education and care in the Dutch hybrid ECEC system, *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* 15.

Study of Dutch early-childhood organisations and the quality they offer to different groups of children. Its reference list covers international research on structural and process quality.

Labour market

CBS (2026). Labour-market tightness eases slightly.

Quarterly figures on vacancies and unemployment since 2016, with vacancy rates by sector.

IZZ (2024). Monitor Healthy Work in Care 2024.

Annual survey of care workers on health, workload and intention to leave, broken down by age. Earlier and later editions show the trend.

Other countries

Trägårdh, L. (2022). Conservatism needs some Swedish love, *UnHerd*.

Short explanation of Swedish “statist individualism”. The book *The Swedish Theory of Love* by Berggren and Trägårdh develops it in full.

Swedish Government (2015). Proposition 2014/15:147.

The bill abolishing the municipal child-raising allowance, with statistics on its users and the government’s reasoning.

Federal Agency for Civic Education. Betreuungsgeld.

Description of the German care allowance of 2013–2015. The ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court of 21 July 2015 (1 BvF 2/13) gives the legal reasoning; Bavaria’s state version shows how the idea continued.

Kela. Child home care allowance and changes as of 1 January 2027.

Rules and amounts of the Finnish home-care allowance, including municipal supplements and the changes from 2027.

NAV. Cash-for-care benefit.

Rules of the Norwegian cash-for-care benefit. The Norwegian government’s family-policy pages give its history since 1998.

Csalad.hu. Grandparent’s child care benefit.

Conditions and amounts of the Hungarian benefit for grandparents, within the wider Hungarian family-policy system described on the same site.

Filetti (2025). De-familialisation trajectories, 1990–2015, LSE Research Online.

Comparative study of family-policy change in European countries and Japan, with an overview of the typologies of Leitner and of Saraceno and Keck.

Cornell Chronicle (2011). Shared child care gave rise to human altruism, says Hrdy.

Summary of Sarah Hrdy's work on cooperative breeding. Her book *Mothers and Others* (2009) gives the full argument and the anthropological evidence.

Better Care Network. Patterns of grandparents caring for grandchildren in China.

Survey data on grandparental care in China, from the China Health and Nutrition Survey, with a link to the full chapter by Feinian Chen.

Principles

Jongen, E., Koot, P. & Vlekke, M. (2016). It can't be made more fun, but it can be made easier, *ESB*.

Analysis by economists of the Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis of simplifying taxes and benefits, with calculations of the income effects of abolishing individual benefits.

The guild

Maze-Guild. Manual.

Manual of the guild prototype described in section 10, covering the user's address, direction, the second guild of masters, gaps and the decision record. The prototype is in development and the manual changes with it. Experimental software, named here only.

Konstapel, J. (2026). The Use of Deontic Logic in the MAZE-Bank.

Description of a register of deeds between people, with money used only at the boundary, and its relation to deontic logic. It refers to the formal English article on the same design.