

Helsinki

Starting school in Helsinki

Frequently asked questions



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Starting school in Helsinki

Instructions

What do you need to know when your child is starting Finnish school for the first time? What kind of information do you need before school starts to ensure smooth and stress-free first school days and weeks? This guide aims to provide support and answers to questions that families who are new to Finland often have.

Finnish school

Your child may attend primary school (pupils aged 7–12), lower secondary school (pupils aged 12–16) or comprehensive school (pupils aged 7–16). Some schools also have a daycare centre operating in the same building.

All schools run by the city are called local schools. This means that as a rule, all children attend a school in their own neighbourhood. The pupils of many Helsinki schools speak several languages and have different backgrounds. However, Finland has two national languages Finnish and Swedish, which is why our schools in Helsinki are either Finnish-speaking or Swedish-speaking. Therefore, the language of instruction in our schools is either Finnish or Swedish, unless the pupil has taken a language test and been admitted to education in a different language.





A Before school starts

Enrol to 1st grade online

As a rule, you can enrol your 6- or 7-year-old child to first grade in local school on the online Asti online service if you have registered your home address to Helsinki. More detailed instructions are available on the website below. You will need a personal identity code and Finnish online banking credentials for the online enrolment. If you do not yet have these, you can always enrol a child to 1st grade by visiting the school on the day of the enrolment, which is usually in January.

- For more information about enrolling to school, see hel.fi/welcometoschool

Enrolment in preparatory education

If a child does not know any Finnish or Swedish, 12-month preparatory education is a great option. The aim is to learn the language while studying other school subjects.

- Learn more at hel.fi/preparatory

Applying for bilingual, English, or other language instruction

In Helsinki, pupils can study in education that is partly in Finnish and partly in another language. We also have fully English-language classes.

Learn more:

- Biligual education hel.fi/bilingual
- Basic education fully in English hel.fi/english-basic-education
- Admissions hel.fi/admissions

Applying for weighed-curriculum education

We offer education with other special emphasis too, such as dance, mathematics, music, and physical education. These start in the 3rd or 7th grade.

- Learn more at hel.fi/weighted

Visit/contact the school to enrol

If you move to Helsinki in the middle of the school year and you need a school place, you must contact your child's local school to enrol your child. In certain situations, you need to visit the school in person to enrol your child.

- Learn more about comprehensive school enrolment at hel.fi/welcometoschool

You can check your child's local school on the Service map by entering your home address in the search field. Here's how you can find out your local school on the Service Map:

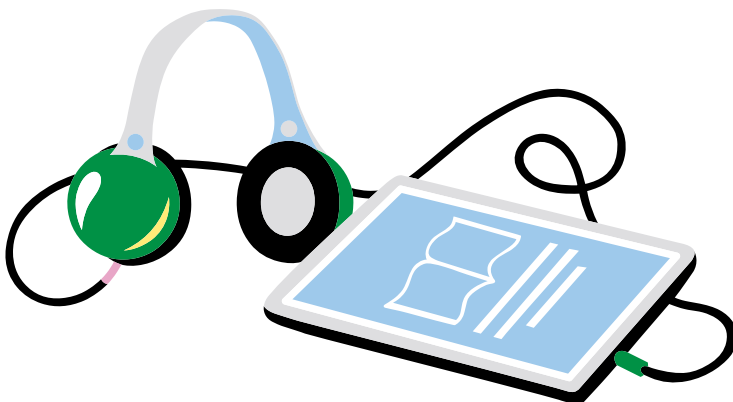
Find your local school

1. Go to the Service map at hel.fi/servicemap and write the child's home address in the search field.
2. You will see results for both the current and the next school year. Therefore, you may see a total of eight different options for your local school: two Finnish-language primary schools (Grades 1-6), two Swedish-language primary schools (Grades 1-6), two Finnish-language lower secondary schools (Grades 7-9) and two Swedish-language lower secondary schools (Grades 7-9).
3. Click on a school's name to find the school's contact details and browse its website to learn more.

Bring with you to the school identification (such as online banking credentials) and the compulsory education note indicating the local school assigned to your child based on your home address. If you move to Helsinki in the middle of basic education, contact the principal of your child's local school. The staff at the school will help you with the enrolment forms and all other practical matters.

Children who don't know any Finnish or Swedish can start school in preparatory education. You can enrol your child in preparatory education as soon as your family has moved to Helsinki.

- Service map hel.fi/servicemap
- Learn more at hel.fi/preparatory



First day at school - what to bring?

What should my child bring to school on the first day?

All a child should bring are a school bag for books and learning materials, a pencil, and an eraser.

Do I need to buy some school supplies/books/items?

Attending school in Finland is free of charge for the pupils, so you do not need to buy books or supplies. The school gives children the materials they need, such as pencils, erasers, schoolbooks, and notebooks. They can also borrow sports equipment for physical education class from the school if they do not have their own skis or skates, for example. However, you must get your child a school bag for carrying schoolbooks and other supplies.

Are school uniforms used in Finland and how do you dress for school?

School uniforms are not used in Finland. Pupils are advised to wear comfortable clothes to school. Please note that usually pupils in grades 1–6 spend their breaks outdoors. They may have several breaks during the day. Breaks last 15–30 minutes and are spent playing and socialising with peers outdoors even when it is raining or cold. If the temperature falls below –15 °C, pupils may spend their breaks indoors. In primary school (grades 1–6), pupils usually leave their coats, outdoor trousers, and shoes in racks outside the classroom for the duration of lessons. Your child may bring indoor shoes to school to be worn during lessons. For PE lessons, children usually bring a change of clothes suitable for the sport, which can be changed in the girls' or boys' changing room. The teacher will give your child all necessary schoolbooks and other supplies.

Schedules and timetables

At what time does the school day begin and end?

There are at least 21–30 hours of teaching per week, depending on the pupil's age. This means that especially in primary school (pupils aged 7–12), school days may be short. The length of the school day varies daily. The teacher will give your child a timetable. The timetable shows when child's school day starts and ends each day.

When are school holidays?

The school year consists of two terms: the autumn and spring term. The autumn term starts in early August and ends with the Christmas holiday. The Christmas holiday lasts for approximately two weeks. The spring term starts in January and ends with the summer holiday in May–June. The summer holiday lasts for over two months. In addition to the Christmas and summer holiday, the school year also includes a week-long autumn holiday in October and a week-long winter holiday in February. The exact start and end dates of the terms and holidays are announced on the school website at the beginning of the school year.

School journeys

Should we take our child to and from school?

You do not need to escort your child to and from school. However, you must make sure that your child knows how to travel to school safely. It is a good idea to practice the journey to and from school together with your child. It is also important that your child arrives at school on time.

We live far away from the school. Do we need to pay for our child's bus tickets ourselves?

You can apply for school transport subsidy: A pupil may be granted a Helsinki Region Transport public transport travel card as school transport subsidy if the distance between the child's home and school is at least 2 kilometres in grades 1–6

or at least 3 kilometres in grades 7–10. If you apply for your child to be placed in a school other than your local school, you will have to cover the school transport costs yourself.

- Learn more and apply for school transport subsidy hel.fi/helsinki/en/childhood-and-education/comprehensive/student-assistance/school-transport

My child has a physical disability. How will we manage school journeys?

Special transportation may be granted upon the guardian's application and based on a statement by a psychologist, school social worker or physician. Special transportations usually mean shared taxi rides, so you should be prepared that the journey to school may take longer.



B During the school day

Studying

How do I know what will be studied at each grade?

Helsinki's curriculum for basic education is available online (only in Finnish). You can also explore the curriculum summary in Swedish, English, Swedish, Arabic, Estonian, Russian, and Somali. Each school has their own curriculum based on the city-wide Helsinki curriculum. You can find a school-specific curricula on the schools' own websites.

- Helsinki schools' curricula are available in electronic format at the e-Perusteet service at eperusteet.opintopolku.fi (available in Finnish only).

My child has attended 5th grade in another country and is now going to 3rd grade in Finland, why?

In Finland, pupils are placed in the grade corresponding with their age. Children usually start Finnish comprehensive school in the autumn of the year when they turn seven. In many countries, children start school a year earlier. Also, the curricula of different countries are not comparable as such, so even if your child has passed fourth grade in another country, starting at fourth grade in Finland does not mean repeating the same studies. Curriculum contents may vary greatly.

My child has already started school abroad.

Does attending preparatory education now mean missing a year of studies?

In Finland, transferring from one grade to the next does not involve taking a final exam. For example, pupils transfer from preparatory education to basic education based on their teacher's assessment. If a pupil is considered able to cope at comprehensive education, the pupil will be transferred to an age-level grade at the end of preparatory education. The child will not have to take an exam, but the assessment is based on evaluation material collected during preparatory education as well as the teacher's observations.

It takes time for linguistic skills to develop, and the pupil to reach full academic potential. But alongside learning Finnish or Swedish, children also study other school subjects in preparatory education.



Languages and mother tongue studies

Which languages are studied at school? How will my child be supported in learning a new language?

All pupils study Finnish or Swedish, either as mother tongue or as a second language. All pupils start to study a foreign language (A1) in the first grade. They also have the option to take up another foreign language in the third grade. In Swedish-language schools, the A1 language is Finnish. Furthermore, in most Finnish-language schools all pupils start to study Swedish in the sixth grade.

Every school has its own language selection. Support is available for language studies just as for any other subject. The need for support will be discussed and agreed upon together with the teacher.

How do I enrol my child in mother tongue studies? Where will it be taught?

You can enrol your child in mother tongue (language you speak at home) studies using a mother tongue studies registration form that is also available at your school. The teaching will be organised so that pupils from various schools and different grades will be combined into teaching groups. In practice, a child might need to travel to another school for these classes. The teaching locations vary annually, and your local school secretary will let you know where the teaching will take place.

- Ask for a mother tongue studies registration form from the local school

Why does my child's mother tongue group include children of different ages and skill levels? In Helsinki, mother tongue studies are provided in approximately 40 different languages. A teaching group must include at least 10 pupils. To make that size, we put together pupils from various schools and age groups.

Assessment

How is my child's competence and learning assessed?

Read more about our assessment procedure on our webpage 'Assessment of learning'.

- Learn more: hel.fi/helsinki/en/childhood-and-education/comprehensive/what-how

What kinds of study steps/grades are necessary to ensure that my child has a good future?

If a pupil is doing poorly at school, the situation will be reviewed in cooperation between the school staff and the child's family, and the child will be provided with support to improve the pupil's performance. Compulsory education continues after comprehensive school, and the pupil must apply to what we call upper secondary education. The grades on the pupil's comprehensive school-leaving certificate will be used to apply for vocational or upper secondary education, so if your child is aiming for a certain profession, it is worthwhile to look into the admission criteria of the studies already when the pupil is in lower secondary school (i.e., in Grades 7-9).

You should not be too concerned about your child's future studies or career options during comprehensive school. All doors will remain open with a good basic performance. In Finland, it is also irrelevant in terms of your future which school you attended in comprehensive school.

School meals

What kind of meals do you have at school?

Pupils are served a warm school lunch daily, with two main dish options. The lunch includes a warm dish, salad, graded vegetables or fresh vegetables, drink, bread and spread. Special diets can be accommodated without any extra cost.

My child has many allergies, should I prepare a packed lunch for school?

Pupils with special dietary needs are served meals based on the general special diet guidelines. Special diets such as gluten-free, pork-free, vegan, vegetarian and lactose-free diets can be accommodated without any extra costs. You can let the school know about your child's special diets by filling out a special diet form. Ask for the form from your local school.

In addition to providing a free school lunch, many Helsinki schools also sell affordable afternoon snacks.

Matters related to your child's health

What if my child falls ill?

If your child falls ill, you must report the absence first thing in the morning by telephone or via the Wilma app (see "What is Wilma?"). The school will let you know what the best way of reporting absences due to illness is.

My child has diabetes, how will the school help?

The guardians have the main responsibility over the treatment of their child's medical condition. If your child has diabetes, contact the principal and the school nurse. Your child's specialised diabetes nurse will also contact the school after your child has been diagnosed with diabetes. Once the school nurse has been informed of the illness, the nurse will call a meeting for the parties necessary for the successful self-care of diabetes: school principal, class teacher/supervisor, school assistant, school nurse and possibly a representative from the pupil's after-school activities. All these parties will look after your child's safety during the school day.

What kind of care will my child receive at school in the event of an accident?

Schools have multiprofessional teams and the school health service is responsible for matters related to health. The school nurse will meet with pupils regularly to monitor their growth and development. In case of an accident, medical care will be provided for a pupil at a local health station, but first aid related to school accidents as well as other first aid will be provided by the school staff. Additional information on the school health service is available on your school's website.



C After the school day

Homework

Should I help my child with homework?

Teachers will usually only assign homework that the pupils are able to do on their own. If you find that your child often struggles to independently complete homework, let the teacher know.

What if I cannot help with Finnish-language homework?

Even if you do not speak Finnish or understand the assignment, you can still support your child with homework. You can, for example:

- ▶ agree on a specific time of day when your child will do homework
- ▶ ensure that you have a quiet place and the necessary equipment for doing homework
- ▶ ask to see your child's homework every day
- ▶ talk to your child about schoolwork and homework and say that you consider them important.

Why are the children given so little homework?

The purpose of homework is to repeat the things the children have learnt during the school day. Children need time to recover, play and engage in other activities after doing their homework. Ensuring that children have the opportunity for recovery and recreation supports learning.

Hobbies

How much do hobbies cost?

Schools organise club activities in connection with school days. Participation in school club activities is free of charge and voluntary for the pupils. Since autumn 2021, every City of Helsinki comprehensive school has also offered free activities for pupils in grades 3–9 in accordance with the Finnish model for leisure activities. These activities are free of charge and voluntary, take place after the school day and at the pupils' own school or nearby. Pupils may also participate in schoolchildren's playground activities. Learn more about hobbies and clubs on the school websites.

Which age groups are after-school activities intended for and where do they take place? After the school day, pupils can participate in guided activities what we call after-school activities. You need to apply for a place for each term and pay a fee for these activities. Basic education after-school activities are organised for pupils in grades 1–2 and pupils in other grades who need special support. The activities take place at school or in other nearby facilities suited for children's leisure activities. After-school activities start after the school day ends and end either at 16.00 or 17.00, depending on the activity organiser.

A monthly fee of €100 or €120 is collected for after-school activities. You can apply for a reduction in the fee at the client fee unit.

- ▶ See 'Client charges for after-school activities' at hel.fi/afternoonactivities



Contact with school staff

How do I contact my child's teacher?

When you visit your child's school for the first time, the teacher will give you his or her contact information. Many schools ask parents to primarily contact school staff via Wilma.

What is Wilma?

Wilma is an application and an online platform that allows messaging between school staff and guardians. Schools also use Wilma to communicate important information to families. You can also use Wilma, for example, to let the teacher know if your child will not be able to attend school.

► Log in to Wilma at helsinki.inschool.fi

In Finland, schools tend to keep in touch with the families actively, and guardians are encouraged to participate in the communications and teacher-parent evenings whenever they can. This ensures a smooth and safe schoolwork for all.

How should I address my child's teacher?

Your child's teacher will be happy to help in all matters related to schoolwork. In Finland, teachers are addressed by their first name.



Advisory service for English-language and bilingual servicestel

email: eduguidance@hel.fi



Street address: Töysänpäätie 2 D, 00510 Helsinki

postal address: PO Box 51300, 00099 City of Helsinki

switchboard: 09 310 8600 on weekdays at 8.15 am–4 pm



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For up-to-date information, see hel.fi/en/childhood-and-education/basic-education and the school websites.