Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) is at the heart of the concerns of family organisations and is high on the agenda of the EU2020 strategy.

**What is ECEC?**

ECEC refers to the care provision and education of very young and young children outside of their family and home setting. The use of external childcare services is based on the combination of two factors, parental choice and the availability of such services.

We can differentiate between two stages, firstly the very young children between 0-3 years old and secondly, children between 3 and the compulsory schools age in their given country of residence.

There are great differences between the Member States of the European Union in terms of ECEC, and these are related to historical, cultural and economic factors.

Childcare provision is part of "public services" in the broad sense, but is much more than that because it also plays into the other two strands:

First, through access to a childcare place or the cost of it, childcare provision affects a family’s financial resources, and second, childcare arrangements and family/work life balance policies determine how much time parents are able to spend with their children and family.

**What are the benefits of ECEC?**

Better child well-being and learning outcomes. Guarantee that all children have the same opportunity to develop their abilities. Higher female labour market participation and gender equality. Better social and economic development for society at large.

**How to achieve accessible, affordable and quality childcare?**

**1. Accessibility and availability**

In most countries, parents’ needs for available childcare places are not being met. It is a failing that must be addressed. There are two dimensions to this aspect, on the one hand each child should have an affordable place if the family needs one, and on the other, the opening hours of the structure must also serve the interest of the working parents, keeping in mind the child’s biorhythm and wellbeing.

Whenever childcare facilities receive funding from public authorities, they must guarantee the accessibility of all children without distinction based on socio-economic background or ethnic origin.

**2. Affordability**

High costs and low disposable income should not be an obstacle for the family to find a childcare place locally.
Public authorities must ensure sufficient available places for families who need them. In case this is not possible, through price adjustments to the level of income, a system of vouchers or subsidies enable low-income or poor families to have a place in private childcare facilities locally, to avoid long distance commuting for the very young children and their parents.

Measures to help vulnerable families gain access to childcare should in no way compromise the quality of childcare.

3. Quality

Formal childcare cannot be just a sort of formalised child minding or babysitting service that merely enables parents to work. Childcare must form part of a long term educational plan that is in harmony with the educational programme for the 3- compulsory school age group.

There should be clear definitions on the appropriate training of the professionals eligible to work in the day-care institutions. COFACE encourages a better gender balance for the early childhood profession, as to have more men in this female dominated sector.

4. Involving Family organisations

The authorities must provide both financial and administrative support to family associations and give recognition to their key role in family-oriented social and educational policies.

They should also pay more heed to the policy demands and recommendations of family associations and recognise them structurally as a partner in the dialogue and decisions on childcare.

5. Children with special needs

Parents of children with a disability struggle to find a childcare place for many reasons: the higher cost of the extra staff needed in care facilities, the loss of earnings for a provider unable to take the maximum number of children allowed, issues with fitting-out the premises, lack of staff training... All these issues therefore need to be addressed.

6. European policies

Through its coordinating role in particular, the EU can contribute to the development of better childcare policies and provision and the recognition of the key role it plays in social, education, employment and many other policies.

COFACE calls on the European institutions to:

- Promote flexibility and diversity in childcare provision, the importance of local policies based on families’ needs and respect for parental choices.
- Define minimum quality standards for childcare, decent pay and a core curriculum for all professional childcare workers.
- Scrutinise Member States' progress on the development of childcare provision plans and make recommendations to promote their development.
- Permanently exclude childcare provision from the scope of the Services Directive.
- Officially recognise ECEC policies as an integral part of education & social policy.
- Give childcare providers easier access to the European Structural Funds.
- Call on Member States to conduct surveys and studies on families’ real needs, with the help of family organisations.
- Ensure cross-cutting support for childcare provision in other DGs’ policies and set up expert groups.


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**COFACE as the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union, brings together a large number of civil society organisations with the aim of giving a voice to all families and representing the issues most important to them at the European level. | More: [www.coface-eu.org](http://www.coface-eu.org) | Follow us on Facebook /COFACE.EU | Twitter: @COFACE_EU**

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