

## Early Childhood Care and Education

**Early Childhood Education and Care** 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 in the second group we can categorize the children between 3 and the compulsory schools age in their given country of residence. It is generally perceived that the care services offered to the first age group is mostly a service to the working parents, and that the second stage focuses more on the educational needs of the child. However, since the 1990s we see a shift towards a general approach to education and care to children from 0 to the compulsory school age.

There are still great differences between the Member States of the European Union in terms of ECEC, and these are related to historical, cultural and economic factors. There exist diverging views as to what is best for children and what serves the interests of (working) families, therefore we look at the commonalities rather than the differences. For while childcare provision is central to many policies - child welfare, education, social and even employment policies - it is still not getting the political priority it deserves.

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:

- Through access to a childcare place or the cost of it, childcare provision affects a family's **financial resources** (both in terms of cost savings and maintaining employment income).
- Childcare arrangements and family/work life balance policies determine how much **time** parents are able to spend with their children and family.

In addition, research has now largely proven, that investing in high quality early childhood care and education has a number of benefits, it leads to:

- better child well-being and learning outcomes;
- guarantee that all children have the same opportunity to develop their competences and abilities to their highest potential and thereby reduce the effects of poverty and inequality on a child's development;
- increased intergenerational social mobility;
- higher female labour market participation and gender equality;
- increased fertility rates; and
- better social and economic development for society at large

It is also noteworthy, that the average age at which children start at ECEC services differs greatly, and is generally linked to the length and level of financial support of the leaves available to families (maternity/paternity/parental/adoption). The starting age therefore varies between 4 months old (Belgium, France), to 1 year old (Sweden), 2 year old (UK) and 3 year old (Austria, Hungary).

**COFACE advocates for accessible, affordable and quality childcare**, and in this policy position document we aim at giving more detail as to how this can be achieved through better social, financial and other related policies. In Annex to this document we also give a number of examples of solutions in the different Member States.

We also aim at looking at a 4<sup>th</sup> dimension, namely the possible role for family organisations, and how those can be strengthened even further.

For the sake of this position paper we will not go into detail about the particular forms of early childhood care and education, but we acknowledge, that there are the following, and their different permutations in the Member States:

- formal (state provided crèche, kindergarten, nursery)
  - informal (grandparents, relatives, babysitters, au-pairs)
  - semi-formal (accredited, licenced Tagesmutter, Gardienne, childminder)
- In practice the distinction between formal and informal ECEC is not always clear-cut.

## 1. Accessibility and availability

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It is important to stress that 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 (universalism), 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 well-being. While crèches/nurseries tend to be the most sought-after form of childcare for the 0-3 age group, parents' needs are as varied as their work, family, cultural, social, geographical, etc. situations. Single parents, low income families, parents working non-standard hours (weekends, weekdays after 6 pm), jobseeker parents, parents still in education - all these situations require different types of

childcare. Promoting the development of a single type of childcare provision like nurseries/crèches that are often only open during "standard" office hours is nowhere near enough since they don't offer care schemes for non-predictable working hours and are therefore not meeting the needs of a substantial part of the parents.

In addition to the coverage in terms of available places, we need a childcare policy that supports the **diversity** of types of provision and is **flexible** enough to be able to reflect the real lives of the families who rely on these facilities locally and to address their needs, without forgetting the employees of these childcare facilities who also have a right to a family life. Examples can be given of many types of childcare provision that address different needs:

- **Emergency childcare:** for children under the age of 3 whose parents are unemployed and on work training schemes, are going for a job interview and/or have found a job.
- **Drop-in, part-time babysitting services,** that cater for jobseekers, or parents with occasional work, or self-employed, or those who are not in employment but still need childcare
- **Sick child sitter services:** parents who cannot care for their sick child can have a sitter to look after him/her at home.
- **Multi-purpose childcare facilities:** offer regular or occasional childcare according to what families need.
- **Out-of-hours childcare:** for children up to the age of 12 before 7 am and/or after 6 pm, or even night-nurseries
- **Employer supported childcare:** run by one or more companies in partnership, providing childcare at or near the parent's workplace, or in a purpose built company childcare facility

The Barcelona targets set out by the European Union, have been calling on the Member States to improve the coverage and availability of places for both age groups, for children under the age of 3 and the 3 to the compulsory school age group, as well as setting quality standards for facilities and staff training. What has never been done, however, is to consider the demand-side and **respect parental choice**.

**COFACE's position:**

- **Childcare provision for children under the age of 3 and aged 3-compulsory school age should meet parents' and childrens' needs**
- **There needs to be a variety of childcare options available to suit the different social, economic and cultural background and situation of families. Public policies on establishing and financing childcare facilities should promote a wide mix of childcare provision to meet parents' needs.**
- **There should be more officially-funded surveys and studies to better identify parents' real needs.**
- **Guarantee the freedom of choice of parents, regardless of the childcare option, and ensure the provision of support tailored to their choice.**

- **Help parents find solutions in case their needs are not met or their preferred choice is not available.**

Parents and future parents should also have the possibility to **inform** themselves about the different childcare opportunities. Here, family associations have a key role to play in partnership with the authorities. Local public authorities can have dedicated websites and information brochures explaining the different childcare options available in the community, and family associations can also play a vital role in spreading information and supporting parents or parents-to-be by providing them with assistance and support tailored to their needs. Family organisations can also organise information sessions or “coffee mornings”, where besides informing parents about the available options, parents, or parents to be can also discuss and exchange experiences among themselves. We know that the availability of childcare can even contribute to family choices about where to live.

#### **COFACE’s position:**

- **The authorities should set up a one-stop-shop portal of resources and information for parents and parents-to-be on all parenting-related matters and a web platform with practical information for parents on childcare facilities (availability, fees, allowances and subsidies, vouchers, types of childcare, educational programme and philosophy, etc.) and enabling direct communication between parents.**
- **Family associations must receive official support and recognition as legitimate partners in their role of informing, supporting parents and advising local authorities on parents’ and families’ needs.**
- **Whenever childcare facilities receive funding from public authorities, they must guarantee the accessibility of all children without distinction based on ethnic origin, socio-economic background or religious beliefs. On their side, childcare facilities must respect philosophical and religious neutrality rules as well as the beliefs and convictions of parents.**

## **2. Affordability**

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Not only parents' needs vary widely, so do their abilities to pay. Many parents cannot find childcare places that they can afford even though studies show that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from attending early childhood care and education services.

The distinction between societal and parental investment is particularly relevant for decisions concerning non-parental child care, where the choice of whether to use external forms of care remains up to parents, but the government can influence this choice by changing the opportunities available to them and the quality of the service they can buy.

In most countries public and private childcare options co-exist for parents to choose from, mostly in the category of formal care. Informal care is exclusively private arrangements, while formal care can also be public or private. Linking to the dimension of availability, in some parts of Europe, mostly in densely populated urban areas, sometimes parents cannot place their child in public childcare, and therefore have to pay a private childcare facility, to be able to go to work. This is where the parental choice no longer applies.

Unavailable and/or expensive childcare options can also motivate parents to turn to informal and often unlicensed childcare options, namely nannies or au-pairs, mostly from migrant backgrounds, and often in unregulated circumstances. The payment to these private migrant childminders is not always subject to taxation either.

**COFACE's position:**

**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**

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It must be emphasised that formal childcare cannot be just a sort of formalised child minding or babysitting service that merely enables parents to work. Childcare absolutely must form part of a long term educational plan that is in harmony with the educational programme for the 3-compulsory school age group, and addresses the five domains of childhood development: physical, social, emotional, language development and cognitive skills.

There are a number of outcomes for the child that should be met, as they represent an opportunity for the child's development, and are instrumental to his/her entire educational pathway. Research shows how important these early years are for the entire later life, even up to employment prospects. This is in particular noteworthy for children with migration or ethnic minority or Roma background, as the social integration, language acquisition will determine how well they fare later in school, and potentially even contribute to the prevention of early school leaving. Through formal childcare attendance also the parents of these children are drawn into the community formed by other parents and families, and the school has a non-negligible role in facilitating this integration and social cohesion process.

Another aspect very important to the well being of young children is a smooth transition from the care of the parents into the first childcare structure, and

then between all subsequent different institutions, from the crèche to the Kindergarten, and then from Kindergarten to school.

#### **COFACE's position:**

**Establish national and European quality standards for childcare facilities based on existing international guidance that respect the needs and interests of children and families, in partnership with local family organisations, parents associations, and organisations representing the interest of children.**

Many European countries lack clearly defined rules on setting up a childcare facility, the requirements for obtaining an official operating licence, or the formal qualifications required to become a professional childcare worker. The rules are being revised and spelled out in detail but much remains to be done to ensure high standards of childcare facilities and staff qualifications. Certain standards should apply to all childcare providers. These include the number and quality of staff, the quality of the physical aspects of the facility and the philosophy and principles of the care.

As to the physical facilities of childcare, standards should be defined so that children's safety and health are not compromised. The facilities should support children's cognitive, social and physical development. The facility should be safe in terms of materials and access. There should be enough room for children to play (square meters/child). There should be possibility for daily outdoor activities and the level of the noise should not exceed a certain decibel level.

The need for high quality standards in childcare has been justified by many studies, notably looking at the level of stress and well-being of children. One research shows for instance that the cortisol levels of children attending higher quality childcare facilities declined across the child care day<sup>1</sup>.

Professional childcare workers have to contend with many different situations. Looking after children with disabilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds or from migrant families that do not speak the local language are obvious examples. But there are also other less common situations for which appropriate training is needed, such as how to deal with situations of domestic violence (violence between the parents, child suffering physical, psychological, emotional or other abuse, or difficulties within the family, such as substance abuse, mental health problems), what dietary habits should the facility encourage and how to respond to children's different dietary needs, allergies and the prevention of childhood obesity. There should be clear definitions on the appropriate training of the professionals eligible to work in the day-care institutions.

Beyond the need for training, there is obviously the issue of training opportunities; the acute shortage of places in training courses for professional childcare workers is a problem in many countries. An appropriate level of staff

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16784501>

training therefore cannot be required without investing to ensure a sufficient number of training opportunities.

The status and pay accorded to the job of professional childcare worker greatly influences the availability and quality of places. In some large cities like Paris the only form of childcare available are collective nurseries and child-minders are virtually unknown because the cost of living and rents are too high for child-minders to operate. The same problem also applies more generally to the teaching profession. This plays directly into the problem of the postcode lottery in childcare provision, and different types of provision in urban and rural communities. Therefore the appropriate recognition, both monetary and societal of the early childhood professionals is key in the success of the structures, and to the development outcomes of the children.

**COFACE's position:**

**As to training:**

- The curriculum for professional childcare worker training must be so defined that these future professionals emerge trained to address the need for a varied supply of childcare arrangements that meet the specific needs and situations of parents and children.
- Invest in the creation of an adequate number of training places for professional childcare workers.
- Professional childcare workers should have their skills recognised and valued and appropriate pay that enables them to do their job in the best conditions.
- Policies must be put in place to manage the population structure and area distribution of professional childcare workers, such as through start-up aid, housing assistance and training in areas where it is lacking.
- Encourage a better gender balance for the early childhood profession, as to have more men in this very female dominated sector, especially by working on the acceptability by parents of men working in jobs related to early childhood.
- There should be clear guidelines for the physical facilities that ensure children's' safety and support their healthy development.

It is also very important to cultivate parental confidence in childcare facilities, and a number of practices and recommendations can be identified.

Parents must be seen as **partners** by childcare facilities and also have their own specific "needs" - contact with the staff to be properly informed and reassured about the running and quality of the facility but also to be able to propose initiatives.

**COFACE's position:**

- Give parents recognition as primary educators of their children in childcare facilities.

- **Make parent participation a quality criterion for childcare facilities.**
- **Develop a culture of openness towards parents: transparency in terms of training of the staff, number of children in each group and per trained professional, as well as principles and philosophy of the activity and daily/weekly program of a group, etc**
- **Involve parents by seeking their input.**

Finally, types of childcare initiated by community groups and parents' associations should be promoted and supported. They need support to meet the standards and rules that govern the funding and operation of childcare provision and staff qualifications.

**COFACE's position:**

**As regards childcare facilities:**

- **Rules on childcare facilities must guarantee quality standards defined by law as they are key in ensuring the quality of the service. There should be guidelines for maximum number of children per qualified staff member to ensure appropriate attention for each child. Children under the age of three years require more personnel, as well as children with special needs or recent immigration background. .**
- **Child groups should not be too large so that the environment is not too stressful and noisy for a child to spend several hours per day.**
- **The standards should also take into account the situations specific to each type of childcare. Voluntary providers or other not-for-profit facilities should be eligible to receive public funding support to ensure that they can comply with the universal standards of quality for childcare facilities without compromising on the health and safety of children.**
- **Private childcare facilities must be governed by the same rules in order to ensure that there are no double standards in quality.**
- **Parents must have the right to visit the premises of the childcare facility of their choice, meet the staff and be given a "trial" period to assess whether their child feeling well in that specific facility.**
- **Support types of childcare initiated by parents or voluntary groups, especially family associations, through recognition of professional experience in awarding professional childcare qualifications and financing appropriate to their situation and the extra effort made by these providers to go beyond standard forms of provision to cater for families' specific needs.**
- **Encourage involvement by additional early childhood professionals, experts, extern to the facilities which will both benefit child development and support parenting (a visiting doctor running a workshop for parents on nutrition, a visiting educational psychologist specialising in child development, music and art, sport etc.).**



## 4. Involving Family organisations

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Family associations contribute in three main ways to childcare provision:

- They run large-scale information campaigns and provide support and guidance to parents.
- They provide advocacy for families, parents and children towards policy-makers.
- They organise childcare facilities themselves.
- They provide statistics, research and data about the situation of families.

**COFACE's position:**

**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.**

**The authorities 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. Finally, authorities should provide support to family associations in their research and data gathering to better monitor the situation of families across Europe.**

## 5. Children with special needs: equal rights in theory, not in practice

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The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enshrines the commitment by States to ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind. Article 7 specifically on children with disabilities provides that "States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children"<sup>2</sup>.

These principles require that children with disabilities should have the same access to childcare as all other children. In fact, this is anything but the case. 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 (where the law provides that a child with a disability limits the maximum number of children accepted), issues with fitting-out the premises, lack of staff training ... All these issues therefore need to be addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/french/law/disabilities-convention.htm>

## COFACE's position:

- Expand childcare provisions of children with disabilities in regular childcare structures through financial incentives and extended resources for the facilities that commit to improve their accessibility.
- Promote a mix of disabled/non-disabled users and prioritise the improvement of existing facilities
- Require childcare facilities to define quality standards, care arrangements and personalised plans for children with disabilities.
- Make the renewal of a childcare facility's operating licence contingent on implementing an action plan for caring for children with disabilities.
- Extend training in caring and accompanying children with disability to all childcare professionals.
- Create a national resource centre to inform families, provide technical support to childcare providers, identify good practice and coordinate key issues like financing, legal and regulatory requirements, etc.
- Include disability in the quality standards for childcare provision.
- Better support for women who have given birth to children with disabilities.

## 6. European policies

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Even though education, public services and family policy are national responsibilities, the European Union still has a role to play in the development of childcare provision.

There have been quite a lot of policy recommendations from the European Institutions already:

- The **European Parliament** report of 23 March 2011 on Early Years Learning in the European Union (2010/2159(INI)) Committee on Culture and Education<sup>3</sup>.
- The Communication from the **European Commission** of 17 February 2011, "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow" COM (2011) 66<sup>4</sup>.
- The conclusions of the **European Council** of 19-20 May 2011 on early childhood education and care<sup>5</sup>.
- The conclusions of the **European Council** of 15-16 March 2002 which led to the well-known **Barcelona targets** of providing childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 and 6 years old and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2011-0099&language=FR>

<sup>4</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2011:0066:FIN:FR:PDF>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/122123.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/122123.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf)

Childcare provision also ties directly into the EU's **2020 strategy** through two key objectives: reducing the early school leaver rate to 10%, and taking at least twenty million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Early Childhood Care and Education has also received particular attention in the **European Social Investment Package (SIP)**, in particular in the European Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013 Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage<sup>7</sup>.

Through its coordinating role in particular, therefore, 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.

The EU could therefore review the Barcelona targets set in 2002 to adapt them to changes in childcare provision, focusing more on the quality or diversity of childcare facilities for example, alongside numbers of available places.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**COFACE calls on the European institutions to:**

- permanently exclude childcare provision from the scope of the Services Directive.
- officially recognise early childhood policies as an integral part of education and social policy.
- strengthen the Open Method of Coordination (OMC).
- scrutinise Member States' progress on the development of childcare provision in their annually submitted national reform plans and make recommendations to promote their development.
- give childcare providers easier access to the European Structural Funds.
- promote flexibility and diversity in childcare provision, the importance of local policies, policies based on families' needs and respect for parental choice in how their children are brought up.
- call on Member States to conduct surveys and studies on families' real needs, with the help of family organisations.
- define minimum quality standards for childcare (essential to guarantee quality childcare for young children), decent pay and a core curriculum for all professional childcare workers.
- support the creation of expert groups on early childhood issues.
- ensure cross-cutting support for childcare provision in other DGs' policies, including DG MARKET (public services and Services Directive), DG JUST (children's rights, gender equality), DG SANCO (health policies in connection with early age preventive health - diet, etc.), DG EMPL (social and employment policies, the fight against poverty).
- set up expert groups that reflect the cross-cutting nature of early childhood policies, like the expert group on childcare provision and tackling early school leaving.
- involve family associations in EU policy-making.

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<sup>7</sup><http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:059:0005:0016:EN:PDF>