

# Childcare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: at a crossroads between education, family and social policy?

## Policy Brief

COFACE Families Europe launched a discussion in October 2018 at its Graz conference “Building sustainable and future-proof education systems: How can families contribute to a paradigm shift?” by exploring education in a holistic way and bringing the family perspective to debates on education, including the core values of COFACE Families Europe: social inclusion, equal opportunities, solidarity, empowerment, human rights and non-discrimination. As a result of the conference, we produced a series of short briefs summarising some of the emerging trends and challenges.



**Policies and investments for childcare are often coordinated and dealt with by the Minister of Labour, in efforts to increase work-life balance and women’s employment. This has been for long time a measure to support working mothers and, despite the persistence of the stereotype that care activities are to be dealt with by mothers, things are changing: more policies to support working fathers taking on care responsibilities have been introduced and the educational component of childcare has an increasing importance in the design of these services.**

Childcare is not, indeed, only a possibility for parents to go to work, but also has an important impact on child development and has an education component. According to a study from the European Commission on the structure of the [European Education Systems 2017/2018](#), all 28 EU Member States apply the ISCED 0 to publicly subsidised and accredited centre based settings for Early Childhood Education and Care provided for children up to 3 years of age. Out of the 28 Member States, 14 include in the ISCED 0 childcare programmes for children from 0 to 1 year. Other 3 Member States apply the ISCED 0

to childcare programmes for 1,5 years (Latvia) and 2 years (France and Hungary).

However, Ministries of Education are often but not always responsible for Early Childhood Education and Care. Out of the 28 Member States, **Ministries of Education are responsible for ECEC for children up to 3 years old in 15 Member States.**

During the workshop the two panelists presented their perspectives (a local representative responsible for childcare in the city of Graz, and a national representative from the national umbrella organization of family associations in Germany), and later discussed with the audience the main features of their childcare service and the current debates in **Austria** and **Germany**. Below, the presentations and discussions are summarised along key points that could serve as starting points for further analysis and discussion.

### *Key messages*

**Diversity in childcare provision.** Childcare can be provided in formal infrastructures, by registered and accredited childminders and by family members, and via informal and private agreements (e.g. baby-sitting). While informal childcare cannot be considered as formal childcare, in a number of



childminders are accredited and they are required to apply certain standards. In the city of Graz, children placed with childminders are accounted for in the official statistics and, therefore, in the calculation of the total number of children in formal childcare that constitute the official achievement rate of the EU Barcelona objectives.

**Flexibility in childcare provision.** With a growing number of parents working on temporary or atypical jobs, childcare opening hours become crucial to accommodate the need of parents working non-standard hours. The city of Graz is discussing the possibility to introduce flexible childcare hours. In Germany, just like many other crucial factors in child care the opening hours (especially opening hours in the morning and closing hours in the afternoon) differs greatly among States (Länder).

**Inclusion of children with a migrant background.** Both Germany and the city of Graz have established ad hoc programmes for children with a migrant background and having a mother tongue which is not German, to ensure their inclusion and that the child learns German in school from mother tongue teachers and learns his/her parents mother tongue at home.

**Inclusion of childcare infrastructures in city planning and in new built environment.** The city of Graz tries to ensure that in new developments of residential areas, the developers include the building and development of childcare facilities and infrastructures, to accommodate the needs for further residents and increase the city provision.

**Cost of childcare.** Formal childcare services can be public or provided by accredited private providers: both in Germany and in the case of the city of Graz, local /state authorities may provide economic support to parents to lower the out-of-pocket amount that families would have to pay. In Europe, cost of childcare is one of the main reasons for parents not to use childcare facilities because its cost can be as high as almost the monthly salary of one parent. Therefore, in these cases, the parent who earns less (usually the woman) drops out of paid employment to care for the child(ren) at home.

**Right to childcare.** In Germany, a legal entitlement to childcare has been introduced by law and, together with the debate on whether childcare should have a more prominent educational component, a debate started to emerge: if it falls under education as a legal right of the child, should childcare not be generally free for everyone like other levels of education or should there first be more investment into a better quality of the child care? In a growing number of EU Member States, Ministries of Education are getting more and more involved in childcare and the notion of early childhood education and care as positive for child development and part of children's rights is more and more accepted. Therefore, this debate for universal and free childcare should be seriously taken into consideration by policy-makers across the EU.



**Quality of childcare.** However, when considering introducing the entitlement to childcare, like in Germany, it is necessary to consider the quality of the service provided and not only pay attention to increasing the places available. Quality is a fundamental feature both for children development and for parents to decide to use the service and increasing only the availability without considering the quality of the service provided will actually backfire.

***The workshop concluded over two reflections:***

Early childhood education and care is a goal in itself and at a crossroads of the needs of multiple groups in society: child development, parents' employment, economy and women's employment. Considering only one aspect would lead to only partial solutions.

Every child has the right to education, and education is composed of different elements: parental education, formal education (from childcare to school) and informal education (e.g. out-of-school activities).

The key is to find high quality and the right balance among these three components and ensure that the child receives the three of them appropriately.

**Key areas to address further to build 21<sup>st</sup> century childcare**

- >> Diversity in childcare provision.
- >> Flexibility in childcare provision.
- >> Inclusion of children with a migrant background.
- >> Inclusion of childcare infrastructures in city planning and in new built environment.
- >> Cost of childcare.
- >> Right to childcare.
- >> Quality of childcare.

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