

first years
first priority

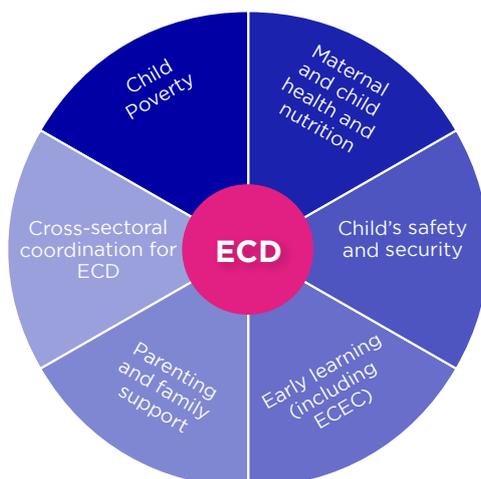


Early Childhood Development in

PORTUGAL

Country Profile 2021*

Portugal has made little progress over the past years in delivering **early childhood development (ECD)** policies and supporting families with young children. Specifically, there is no national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under six years of age. There is a lack of sufficient data regarding young children across ECD policy areas, and it has become evident that the investment in ECD is not holistic. There are some developments regarding the early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy area. These include the intention to bring forward the legal entitlement to an ECEC place from the age of three (it is currently four) and, since September 2020, depending on household income, families have free of charge access to publicly subsidised crèches for children under three years of age. However, overall, early childhood policies do not address the ecosystem around the family and the child holistically, and families do not have access to a continuum of care or a supportive system of high-quality services, programs and policies that are aligned and coordinated.



POLICY AREAS IMPACTING ECD →

Country PRIORITIES

- Track data about poverty for families with young children prioritising single-parent families and families with more than three children.
- Reduce child health inequalities through early detection and intervention and timely access to high quality health services, especially for those most in need (periodic health screenings, particularly in educational settings).
- Monitoring access to ECEC services for children under three years of age.
- Track the level of qualification for ECEC staff working with children under three years of age.
- Create conditions so that children under six years of age currently in alternative care are placed in family-based arrangements.

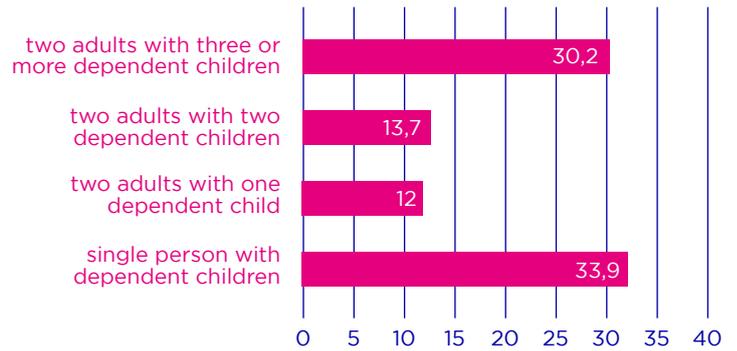
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CHILD POVERTY

In Portugal, there is a **lack of data on child poverty and social exclusion.**

Available data indicate that lone parents and their children, as well as families with many children, are particularly exposed to a higher risk of poverty and need targeted support.

Poverty rate per household type (%)



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PARENTING AND FAMILY SUPPORT

In Portugal, families can access different types of benefits, but most of them are not universally available and depend on household income. In addition, the existence of the benefits does not necessarily imply that they reach the families in need. An example is the free and universal access to the National Health System, which though available, does not meet the needs of the population (see section on Maternal and Child Health).

Types of policies available regulating work and family life balance

- [Parental leave](#)
- [Child-care leave](#)
- [Carer's leave](#)
- [Right to request flexible work arrangements](#)

Benefits available to parents with young children

- Healthcare - Free and universal access to the National Health System for children
- Maternity/Paternity benefit
- Child Benefit (depending on household income)
- Subsidised ECEC (fees based on household income)
- Public social services and counselling
- Food support for vulnerable families.



EARLY LEARNING

In Portugal, 22,6% of children under three years of age are taken care of at home, whereas 52,9% attend formal childcare services. Families are free to choose the crèche they want. Crèches are considered a social service, which allows parents to go to work. In recent years, the availability of places **has increased considerably, yet the coverage is uneven** throughout the country, and is not sufficient to meet demand.

Access to ECEC for children over four is universal, and enrolment is based on a set of priorities that include the age of the children (oldest first), the proximity to the family home, and the family's socio-economic situation.

No data is available regarding the percentage of staff with a minimum of a bachelor's degree working with children under three.

Types of policies available to facilitate ECEC access of children from vulnerable families:

- Since 1 September 2020, ECEC is provided free of charge for children under three whose per capita family income is lower than 30% of the national minimum wage and for the second child and subsequent children of families whose per capita income is between 30% and 50% of the national minimum wage.
- Public ECEC is free and universal from the age of four with a 95,4% attendance rate in 2019.



The capacity of ECEC services to ensure the inclusion of children under six from historically marginalised groups

Children with specific health and learning needs have priority, as do children whose parents the state has identified as unable to provide the necessary care.

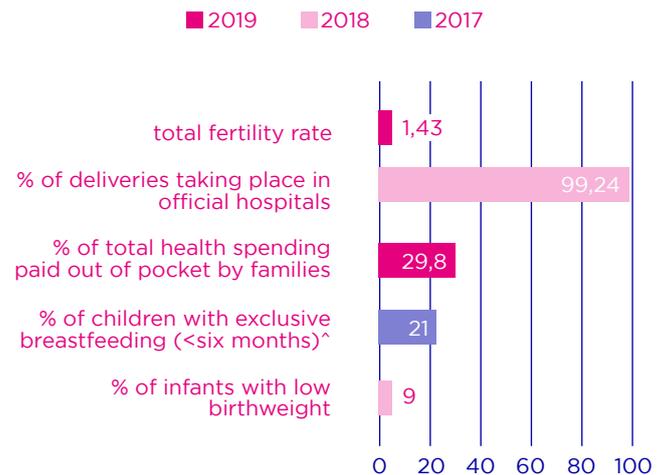
To ensure national coverage for **early intervention provision**, the Ministry of Education created a network of benchmarked school clusters, where over 500 pre-school teachers are placed. These professionals will be part of the local intervention teams working in the school cluster catchment area. These pre-school teachers support children up to the age of six who attend kindergartens that are part of the private or solidarity network, or who are at home, in a family crèche, or with a childminder.

ECEC services have at least one staff member with a tertiary qualification in education sciences and have language programmes as targeted support measures.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Although children up to 18 years old can access the National Health System free of charge (Decree-law 61/2015), inequalities persist. Most of the time, the waiting time for a specialized medical consultation at the public hospitals is several months, which delays timely interventions and can negatively impact child development. Not all families can afford the private sector. Portugal has one of the highest levels of out-of-pocket payments for healthcare (29,8%) at the EU level.

Maternal and Child Health



^Not representative data

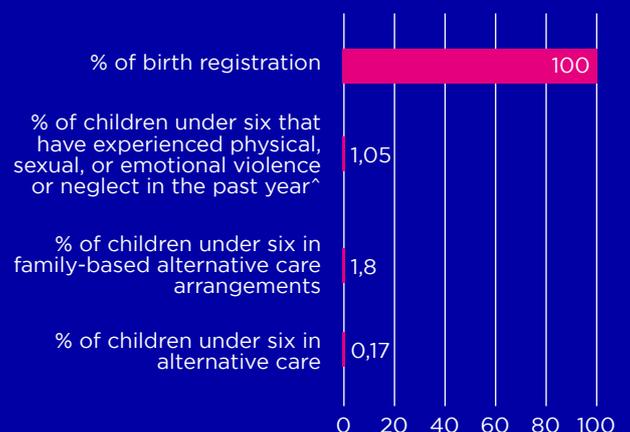
Sources: Eurostat, PORDATA, OECD, Repositório Científico do Instituto Nacional de Saúde

CHILD SAFETY AND SECURITY

Since 2015 (Law 142/2015), family-based care has been established as the preferred measure for children in alternative care, especially for those up to six years old. However, the proportion of children in alternative care living in family-based arrangements in Portugal is low and has been decreasing in recent years (from 7% to 1,8%). In 2019 (latest data available), only 0,17% of children under six were in alternative care.

In terms of children under six that have experienced any type of violence or neglect, the 1,05% reflects the data from the 2019 activity report of the National Commission for Child Protection. However, the data depend on children's referral to the services; there are likely to be more cases that are unknown to these services.

Child safety and security (%)



^Not representative data

Source: UNICEF, Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People, CASA, Instituto da Segurança Social

Note on the figure above: Data on birth registration are from 2017. The rest of data presented in the figure are from 2019.

CROSS-SECTORAL COORDINATION

In Portugal, **there is no explicitly stated national multi-sectoral ECD strategy** (or any other policy document) or a coordinating body overseeing cross-sectorally the ECD policies, funding, and spending at the country or municipality level. However, **there are some formal mechanisms in place for collaboration between sectors and services.**

The **National Early Intervention System** (Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce -SNIPI) represents a mechanism of **coordination** across the Ministries of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, Health and Education, at the national, regional and local level. It aims to guarantee the necessary development conditions for **children up to the age of six** who suffer changes in bodily structure or functions that restrict personal growth and their participation in normal activities for their age or who run the serious risk of stunted development. The national early intervention system is based on three bodies set up at the national, regional and local level, which are, respectively: the national coordinating committee, made up of representatives of the Ministries of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, Health and Education (chaired by a representative of the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security); the regional coordination sub-committees, made up of professionals appointed by those three ministries; and local intervention teams, made up of health, education, social service professionals, therapists, and psychologists, which work at the municipal level, possibly encompassing several municipalities or broken up into parishes, thus ensuring that such services cover the whole country.

Although it does not focus exclusively on young children, **the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People** (Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens), is a good example of a coordinating national public institution operating under the **Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security**. The Commission coordinates all actions taken towards the promotion of the rights and the protection of children and young people in Portugal. It promotes a culture of prevention by **working in a cross-cutting manner and in close cooperation** with the current **310 Local Commissions** for the Protection of Children and Young People. The local commissions at the municipality level are official autonomous entities of a non-judicial nature, working to prevent or eradicate situations that may affect their safety, health, training, education or integral development, while fostering synergies at the local level. The local commissions are formed of representatives of the municipality, Ministry of Education, Health Services, Social Security, NGOs that work with children and their families, NGOs that have centre-based alternative care and the security forces (police), among others.



*The information provided in this Country Profile reflects the situation at the end of May 2021.



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Country Profile Contributor

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THE PARTNERSHIP

Eurochild is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.

International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programmes and services connects early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA Members from 43 countries implement programmes and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.

European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organisation made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.

Roma Education Fund (REF) was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organisation supports policies and programmes which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Children's Rights Alliance (Ireland), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain).

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