

Early Childhood Development and Early Childhood Education and Care

Taken from *Children's Rights:
Political will or won't?*
Eurochild 2023 report on
children in need across
Europe.



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

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Introduction

On the 20th of November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released a report on children in need titled '**Children's rights: political will or won't?**' *Eurochild 2023 report on children in need across Europe*. This is Eurochild's Flagship report and gathers information from 38 Eurochild members in 26 European countries. It identifies solutions and recommendations for governments to better support children and families.

Purpose of the report:

- Assesses the situation of **children's rights in 26 countries** – in the EU and beyond - with recommendations to address specific issues or gaps. The countries are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, Ukraine, Wales.
- **Assesses the Child Guarantee National Action Plans** in these countries, whether they align with the needs identified, and the engagement of Eurochild members and children's engagement in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the plans
- Looks at the extent to which the **European Semester 2023** country reports are aligned to children's needs and experiences
- Gives an overview of the **priorities of countries in accession** regarding the most pressing issues for children, and their involvement in EU-funded projects
- Builds knowledge of the **lived experience of children and families** living in poverty and social exclusion

Several Eurochild members highlighted issues related to early childhood development (ECD), in particular access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) in their country. **The report findings on ECD - including ECEC – included both challenges and some positive developments.**

Challenges identified

Some of the main challenges Eurochild's members have identified are the following:

1. **Few countries analysed focus on a comprehensive and integrated early childhood development plan or support system.** For example, the 2023 European Semester Country Report for **Latvia** outlines the needs of young children but does not include a policy on early childhood development planning, guidance or targets for such support. In **Ireland** however, the government has a 10-year plan to invest in children's early years – the *First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*. The Semester Country Report for **Spain** mentions the government's commitment to improve access to ECEC in all autonomous communities. This is welcome, however it does not include a comprehensive and holistic reference to the importance of early childhood development.

2. **Social inequalities in access to ECEC for some groups of children**, including those living in poverty and Roma/Traveller children. This was identified as a challenge in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Serbia and Ireland. For example, in **Germany**, the Child Guarantee National Action Plan contains important measures to improve access to, and quality of, ECEC but lacks plans to remove financial barriers. In **Ireland**, Traveller and Roma children are significantly less likely to attend early years services, with 17% of services reporting having one Traveller child attending their service, and only 7% reporting a Roma child in their service. In **Serbia**, only 7% of children aged 3–4 from Roma settlements attend pre-school education. Eurochild member, Pomoc deci currently implements the ECD+ project - early childhood development and care for marginalised Roma communities. In **Portugal**, the current intention to expand the pre-school network to provide free access to all 3-years-olds is dependent on funding or on new legislation to recruit teachers. The aim is to provide free access to all children from the age of three.
3. **Lower ECEC participation rates for children under three**. Identified as a problem in Germany, Spain, Portugal and Lithuania. For example, in **Lithuania**, 21.4% of children under 3 are in formal childcare, well below the 2021 EU average of 36.2%. The arrival of Ukrainian displaced children has exacerbated the problem of limited early childhood education and care provision in urban areas. But Eurochild member VŠĮ Auto Moto group welcomes Lithuania's commitment to increase the participation of all children from 2 years of age in pre-primary education as from 2025. Eurochild's member from **Spain** highlighted the need to guarantee universal and free access to early childhood education and care (0-3 years) to help tackle child poverty and social exclusion.
4. There is often **a focus on ECEC as a means to enable parents/mothers to work**, rather than a child-centred approach to early learning and care. This was highlighted by Eurochild partners in Belgium, Cyprus, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal.
5. **The importance of social security and financial support for parents and families**. In **Finland**, Eurochild partner Central Union for Child Welfare highlighted that Finland's relatively low child poverty and social exclusion rate is explained by a good social security system – this includes benefits that belong to all families with children such as child allowance and the right to ECEC, as well as housing support and other services that support the everyday life of families with children. However, CSOs are concerned that the risk of poverty for families with children will increase as a result of planned government cuts to social security.
6. **The need to invest in quality ECEC, with competent and trained staff working with young children**. This was identified as a challenge in Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Portugal, Bulgaria. For example, in **Finland**, Eurochild partner the Central Union for Child Welfare believes that providing the necessary support for a child in the early years requires sufficient resources and competent and trained staff and that raising the participation rate should not be done at the expense of the quality of the childcare services. In the **Netherlands**, a positive reform on accessible and affordable childcare, whereby the government should pay 95% of the costs of childcare for working parents has been postponed until 2027, due to shortages in childcare staff. The government has set a maximum hourly tariff for childcare for which parents receive a childcare benefit. In case

there is a shortage of childcare staff, which is currently the case in the Netherlands, staff salaries rise above the maximum tariff, meaning that poorer families are not able to pay for childcare anymore. In **Portugal**, ECEC needs to consider early child development and early learning, with professionals responsive to specific needs of the children under their responsibility and with parenting support.

Some positive developments

In **Bulgaria**, Eurochild members welcome the abolishing of fees for kindergartens and nurseries. In addition, the amount of financial benefit for raising children in the second year of maternity leave was increased, and so were the tax benefits for working parents. Eurochild members welcome the inclusion of the amendment of the Pre-school and School Education Act, to make pre-school education mandatory from the age of four. They urge quality, age-oriented, and accessible Early Childhood Education and Care practices to encompass the needs of children in bigger cities, where there is lack of some services, and better geographical distribution to address the needs of children in smaller, more remote settlements. There is still a challenge with providing integrated support for the poorest and most marginalised families and children.

In **Portugal**, an intervention that is helping children and their families is the PRIMEIROS PASSOS, infância saudável, vida Feliz project. This supports children from families in poverty and social exclusion (in particular single parents and migrants) from a municipality with 303,854 inhabitants, of which an estimated 4,630 are children up to 2 years old. The project's mission is to reduce and prevent vulnerability in the first 1,000 days. Since 2018 the project has impacted the healthy development of 167 children, including through the provision of nutrition, medication, hygiene items and clothing.

Civil society partners in **Greece** pointed to the 'Kypseli' programme which aims to develop and enhance the capabilities and skills of infants and toddlers, mainly through play, and to regularly monitor and evaluate their development and progress. The National Council for Preschool Education and Training is a new advisory and consultative body. The Neighbourhood Nannies initiative delivers home care services for infants and toddlers. In order to ensure an inclusive educational environment, the integration of children with difficulties from a very early age must be a priority.

Policy recommendations

Overall, on ECD and ECEC the report recommends:

1. To deliver change for the most vulnerable families; the social intervention must be demand-driven.
2. That support to preventative measures should start from the prenatal and early years of children. The first 1,000 days of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development and are highly influenced by the child's environment, early experiences, and interactions.
3. Increased support and public investment in nurturing care and quality early years services, essential for tackling child poverty, inequality and social exclusion.

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