

# Early Childhood Development

Taken from  
*Children's Realities in Europe:  
Progress & Gaps*  
Eurochild 2024 flagship report  
on children in need across Europe.



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the heart of Europe

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# Early Childhood Development

*On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. This sub-report outlines the progress and ongoing challenges affecting very young children and their families and caregivers. It outlines the issues that affect early childhood development, including access to quality early childhood education and care, and makes recommendations to European governments and institutions for ensuring the fulfilment of children's rights from their earliest years.*

## Introduction

Children's rights, from infancy and early childhood, are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has set these out in its General Comment No. 7 (2005) Implementing child rights in early childhood. It has emphasised that young children are holders of all the rights enshrined in the Convention, and that early childhood is a critical period for the realisation of the rights enshrined in the UNCRC. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 2021, recognises that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.

Key articles in the UNCRC include:

- **The right to non-discrimination** (Article 2): The principle that all rights apply to all children without exception, and States have an obligation to protect children from discrimination of any kind, from their earliest years.
- **The best interests of the child** (Article 3): The principle that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children also requires measures to protect and promote their survival, growth, and wellbeing, and measures to support parents and other caregivers.
- **The right to life, survival, and development** (Article 6): Recognises the obligation to ensure, to the maximum extent possible, children's survival and development, and to create the conditions to promote the wellbeing of all young children in infancy.
- **The right not to be separated from parents** (Article 9): Recognises the right of children to not be separated from their parents unless it is deemed necessary for the best interests of the child.
- **The right to participation** (Article 12): The right of all children to express their views, and to be heard, should be implemented from the earliest stage possible and in ways that are appropriate to the child's evolving capacities and best interests.

- **The right to protection from all forms of violence** (Article 19): All children, from the start, have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.
- **The right to the highest attainable standard of health** (Article 24): Recognises the right of every child to enjoy the highest level of health possible, including access to healthcare and nutrition during their early years.
- **The right to an adequate standard of living** (Article 27): Recognises that young children have the right to standard of living that meets their physical, mental, and emotional development. This includes the right to adequate housing. Safe and secure housing is fundamental for children’s healthy growth and development, including in infancy and the early years.
- **The right to education** (Article 28): Recognises that all children have the right to early childhood education, as a fundamental component of children’s development.
- **The right to rest, leisure and play** (Article 31): Recognises the importance of play and recreational activities as a distinctive feature of early childhood, and the need for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centred, secure and supportive environments.

## Findings from Eurochild Members

### 1. Ensuring a national focus and an integrated approach to early childhood development (ECD)

Several countries in Europe have recognised the importance of early childhood development (ECD), and have made efforts towards a comprehensive and integrated approach to the nurturing care services and support needed by infants, young children and their families. A number of countries have national policies and plans that focus on early childhood, including Belgium, Portugal, Bulgaria, Ireland, Wales and Malta.

**Portugal** has adopted a National System of Early Childhood Intervention which is based on coordination between relevant Ministries and works through local multidisciplinary teams to give social, educational and health support to children aged 0-6. **Ireland** has a ten-year strategy, the *First 5: A Whole-of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028*, which sets out national priorities for early childhood development.

In **Romania**, the *Protected Children, Safe Romania* approach focuses on improving the quality and accessibility of services for children under three years of age. In 2023, the Minister of Education in **Albania** made early childhood development a priority, and the Ministry is due to publish plans on proposed reforms in this area. **Wales** recognises the importance of children’s first 1000 days and has a dedicated Minister with responsibility for children’s early years. In 2024 Wales launched the *Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care Plan*, which sets out a range of commitments for children aged 0-5.

While several countries have adopted an integrated approach to ECD, which includes health, early learning, childcare, early intervention and parenting support, others have not. This often leaves parents and caregivers of young children to navigate fragmented support. For example, in **Kosovo**, while the government recognises the importance of children's early years, and is making efforts towards a comprehensive and coordinated approach, ECD services are not integrated with education, health and the social care sectors. However, nutrition has been recognised as an important aspect of ECD and the Ministry of Education has finalised the national diet for pre-school settings. While investing in early childhood is a policy objective in **Spain**, and financial assistance is directed at families with young children, a comprehensive and integrated approach to early childhood is still needed, with measurable targets, indicators and disaggregated data. **Catalonia**, by contrast, has a comprehensive approach to ECD which includes different aspects of child development - education, health, social welfare, and family support. A pillar of this approach is the Comprehensive Plan for Health Promotion, which provides quality healthcare for children from birth to six years of age, with preventive, diagnostic, and therapeutic measures, and health promotion and education programmes for families.

In **Croatia**, there is no comprehensive and integrated approach to ECD, hindering access to timely support and services, especially for children with developmental difficulties and their parents.

## **2. Need for more public investment in children's early years**

Even in countries where there is a national focus on ECD, challenges remain. Eurochild members in several countries highlighted the need for more funding for children's early years.

In **Malta**, which recognises the importance of ECD through various policies and initiatives, additional funding is needed to adequately resource early childhood programmes. **Greece** aims to develop a modern, evidence-based legislative and financial framework for early childhood intervention services, but there are concerns with the lack of sustainable funding for these programmes. Eurochild members in **Latvia** stressed the need for more public investment in ECD.

In **Northern Ireland**, Eurochild's member stressed the need for the government to invest more in early years programmes, childcare, and family support services - such as expanding Sure Start, an integrated programme for children aged 0-3 in disadvantaged communities. Eurochild members in **Croatia** highlighted the need for more long-term, public funding for early childhood intervention services. Eurochild's member in **Italy** highlighted the need to intensify the provision of early childhood services and parental support in the suburbs and marginalised areas. Eurochild members in **Ukraine** identified early childhood support as one of three areas where more public investment is needed.

## **3. Strengthening social welfare and tackling child poverty**

Several Eurochild members highlighted the need to strengthen the provision of social services needed by young children and their families and caregivers. An adequate social

security 'safety net' is crucial to prevent and address child poverty, starting from infancy and early childhood.

Eurochild members in **Croatia** recommend that Croatia take action to ensure an adequate range of social services - including early childhood development - in local communities, in order to prevent child poverty and social exclusion. Eurochild members in **Latvia** stressed the need for a social support system based on children's needs, to promote a safer and more stable family life for children. In **Northern Ireland**, investing in child-related social security benefits was identified as one of the policy priorities that would contribute to ending child poverty and social exclusion.

In **Finland**, government cuts to social security benefits have also affected families with young children and child poverty is expected to increase due to these cuts.

Eurochild's member in **Wales** highlighted the need to fix the social security 'safety net' for all families and reverse reductions in spending for social security payments. They also stressed the need to ensure free school meals for all children, starting with the youngest, and including provision during the school holidays. Strengthening the social welfare system was also among the priorities identified by Eurochild members in **Greece**.

Eurochild's members in **Portugal** stressed the need for adequate financial support, as current social security is not very effective in tackling poverty and social exclusion. High inflation, and the rising costs of energy and food, are disproportionately affecting the poorest households in Portugal.

#### **4. Improving access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services**

Information from the European Commission's Semester Country Reports shows that ensuring access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for all children remains a challenge across European countries, especially for the youngest children. In many countries, the participation of children aged 0-3 in ECEC is very low, including **Italy, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Ireland and Romania**.

In **Estonia**, ECEC participation for children under three is increasing, but is still below the EU average. Planned reform aims to ensure that all children aged 18 months to three years have access to childcare at parents' request. In **Finland**, ECEC participation rates have been increasing but remain below EU targets, and efforts are underway to expand participation, especially for low-income families, by increasing eligibility for free ECEC services.

**Slovakia** introduced a legal entitlement to a place in pre-primary education for all children aged four (from 2024) and all children aged three (from 2025). EU funding is supporting investments in new kindergartens, including in less developed regions.

In **Spain**, there is a need to increase the coverage and quality of ECEC services. 6 out of 10 children do not have access to the first cycle of early childhood education. The government has committed to ensuring ECEC access to children aged 0-3. However, the lack of childcare places and high costs prevent many families in vulnerable situations from accessing ECEC, causing situations of inequality from the first years of life.

**Northern Ireland** announced a £25 million investment in early years and childcare in 2024, which was widely welcomed, but there are still considerable obstacles to delivering a universal subsidy that effectively reduces costs and supports the sector to be fully inclusive for children with additional needs.

There are some welcome developments in other countries too. **Portugal** is expanding public provision of ECEC, aiming to offer free childcare and family daycare centres for all children born on or after 1 September 2021, covering 100,000 children by 2024. Portugal aims to create 15,000 new ECEC places by 2026. In **Cyprus**, while participation in ECEC remains low, and is unaffordable for many households on low incomes, there has been some progress. Pre-school education is now mandatory from the age of four years and six months and the government is also subsidising pre-school and childcare for children from the age of three.

Positively, Belgium and Denmark have high rates of ECEC enrolment. In 2023, **Belgium** reached its national Barcelona target (53.9%) with a participation rate in formal childcare of 56.3% among children under 3 years old, continuing a steady growth trajectory. Among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) between the ages 0-2, 42.5% attended formal childcare in 2023 compared to 58.6% of non-AROPE children. This is above the EU average (25.2% AROPE vs. 41% non-AROPE), but the gap nevertheless remains significant. **Denmark** also has very high ECEC participation rates, especially for children under three. The share of children under three in formal childcare is the highest in the EU.

**Moldova** has a National Programme of childcare services for children aged 0-3, which aims to expand daycare services, workplace childcare facilities, individual childcare, family-based care services and expand private daycare centres for children aged 4-36 months.

## 5. Disparities in access to ECEC

There are significant disparities in ECEC participation in many countries, with some children and families facing particular barriers to access. Even in **Slovenia**, for example, where participation in ECEC is relatively high (92.3% in 2021 for children aged between three and the age of compulsory primary school), children from vulnerable groups are less likely to participate in ECEC. It is estimated that 35% of Roma children aged five in south-eastern Slovenia do not attend pre-school education. **Belgium**, which has among the highest rates of enrolment, also has challenges to equal access to ECEC. Flanders and the Brussels Capital Region have a shortage of childcare places and a lack of staff.

In **Ireland**, Traveller and Roma children are significantly less likely to attend ECEC services. The latest *First 5 Implementation Plan* aims to change this. Eurochild's member in Ireland highlights the need for sustained investment over multiple budget cycles in the new Equal Start funding model of ECEC.

**Italy** has significant disparities, with lower enrolment rates for children from disadvantaged households and significantly lower childcare coverage in some southern regions of the country. The construction of new childcare places, as outlined in the Recovery and Resilience Plan, could help address this.

In **Croatia**, children's participation in ECEC is among the lowest in Europe, with significant geographical disparities, fewer facilities in rural areas and cost and transport barriers. Kindergartens, particularly in smaller towns and the islands, highlight the shortage of professional ECEC staff. However, some local authorities are investing in new kindergartens and expanding existing ones.

In **Bulgaria** there are significant local and ethnic disparities in the provision of, and access to, ECEC services. Despite a national law guaranteeing free pre-primary education, a chronic shortage of ECEC places is particularly evident in big cities and rural areas. According to UNICEF, 45% of Roma children do not attend pre-school groups.

In **Slovakia**, ECEC funding is also targeted at marginalised Roma communities as inclusive education remains a challenge. Roma children have a much lower participation rate in pre-primary education. In **The Netherlands**, a special ECEC scheme for disadvantaged children is in place but there is a shortage of available places, affecting children who most need these services. In **Kosovo**, only 46.2% of pre-school children are girls, while the number of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children included in the early childhood education system is low.

## 6. Ensuring quality ECEC services

Ensuring high quality of ECEC services, with professional standards and qualified staff, remains a challenge, and there is a shortage of ECEC teachers in a number of countries, including **Denmark, Belgium, Germany, Finland** and **Croatia**.

**Denmark** lacks sufficient qualified staff despite having very high rates of ECEC enrolment. Positively, in 2020 Denmark passed a national law on minimum standards in nurseries and daycare centres, norms which came into force in January 2024. In **Finland**, in general, ECEC services are considered to be of high quality, although there is a shortage of ECEC teachers. In **Hungary**, while participation in ECEC is relatively high, quality is affected by a shortage of teachers. In **Bulgaria**, the introduction of a National Quality Framework for ECEC Services has yet to be implemented.

Some countries have taken important measures to improve the quality of ECEC provision. **Kosovo** has adopted Early Learning Development Standards for Children Aged 0-6, and introduced a Law on Early Childhood Education in 2023. The curriculum for Early Childhood Education is being developed. **Malta** has National Standards for ECEC, and a focus on training and development for professionals to ensure they are equipped to provide comprehensive care and education. In **Estonia**, planned reform aims to establish an integrated ECEC system with common quality standards and a unified curriculum.



## Recommendations

Recommendations to national governments and European Union institutions:

1. Increase public investment in early childhood development, ensuring universal access to essential services for all children aged 0–6.
2. Adopt a holistic and cross-sector approach to early childhood development, with a range of integrated services that can support all young children and their families, especially those in need, including parenting and family support.
3. Ensure that initiatives and measures that address child poverty - including the European Child Guarantee - also include a specific focus on children's early years, and adopt national plans with targeted measures to ensure access to essential services for all young children in need, especially those facing discrimination and social exclusion.
4. Strengthen social security safety nets, as a key intervention to eliminate child poverty and social exclusion.
5. Increase public investment to ensure access to quality early childhood education and care for all children, including those aged 0-3.
6. Ensure that ECEC provision is of high quality, with national minimum standards and a qualified, professional and valued ECEC workforce.
7. Fully implement the European Child Guarantee, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the revised Barcelona targets on Early Childhood Education and Care.
8. Support a European Year of Early Childhood.

## Summary

Many countries have policies and programmes that support children in infancy and their early years. Many countries have **specific policies and action plans that focus on early childhood development**, in recognition that children's early years are a crucial time for their healthy development and wellbeing. However, there are **ongoing challenges**, particularly in terms of the resources - both human and financial - needed for the effective implementation of early childhood services and support. **Addressing child poverty, social exclusion and discrimination** – including in early childhood – remains an urgent priority.

Some countries have adopted a **comprehensive and integrated approach to early childhood** – which recognises that infants, young children and their families and caregivers need a range of services and support – healthcare, early learning, nutrition, parenting support and social welfare. However, a more fragmented approach remains in many contexts. Overall, there is a **need for more public investment in early childhood**



**development**, to enable all young children – especially the most disadvantaged – to benefit from nurturing care.

Many countries are making efforts to increase access to early childhood education and care, and expanding childcare facilities, including with support from EU funding. However, more **public investment is needed to ensure access to quality ECEC** for all children, and for a professional workforce that can respond to children’s specific needs.

There are **ongoing geographical, socio-economic and ethnic disparities in ECEC participation** in many countries, with some children facing particular barriers to access.

**Ensuring high quality ECEC services**, with national quality frameworks, professional standards and qualified staff, remains a challenge, and **there is a shortage of ECEC teachers** in a number of countries.

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