

first years
first priority

**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

**A framing document for the European campaign on
Early Childhood Development co-led by
Eurochild and International Step by Step Association**

This briefing provides a description of the policy context in which the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign is launched. It aims to explain:

1. Why is the 'First Years First Priority' campaign needed?
2. What problems does the campaign seek to address and what solutions is it advocating for?
3. How does the campaign achieve change and what are the policy and funding levers at EU level that will be used to support that change?

There is overwhelming scientific evidence of the importance of early childhood development (ECD)¹. It comes from a variety of disciplines, including pedagogy, social sciences, health sciences, neuroscience, psychology, and economics.

Young children are entirely reliant on adults for their care. Children's development depends largely on how parents and caregivers interact with them and respond to their needs. But young children's well-being is not just a private matter. Governments have a critical role to play in supporting parents and families, but also in creating an eco-system of policies and services that support families and children. Many public policies and services are, and should be, designed with that aim.

1. WHY IS THE FIRST YEARS, FIRST PRIORITY CAMPAIGN NEEDED IN EUROPE?

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing social inequalities, and failures in healthcare and social protection systems to protect the most vulnerable. It is also showing that a society is only as strong as its most vulnerable members, and that providing adequate safety nets is in everybody's interest. The effects of the pandemic on young children and their families have been severe², highlighting the need for a recovery that builds stronger, long-term, resilient early childhood systems and sustainable support for families.

All countries in Europe have systems and services in place to support parents and to protect young children's health and development. This includes maternity and parental leave policies, pre- and post-natal healthcare, vaccination programmes, social security as well as early childhood education and care services. It is important to recall that every European country has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which clearly establishes States' obligations towards young children and their families. EU Member States have also ratified other international treaties, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), that are key to realising children's rights in early childhood. The European Union (EU) objective to combat social exclusion and discrimination and protect the rights of children is enshrined in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union.

And yet, the reality in Europe today is that many millions of children are missing out on a fair start in life because their parents and families are not getting the necessary support in line with their needs. Faced with poverty, discrimination and social exclusion, poor housing or domestic violence, many parents cannot care adequately for their children. The consequences are severe, not only for the children themselves but for society as a whole.

To bridge the gap between what we know about the importance of early childhood and many children's actual experience, we want to raise awareness about the challenges families face caring for young children, and the policies and interventions that will help to address them.

We want to increase understanding of, and support for, early childhood development in government policy-making and public investment, as well as among families, communities and the general public, so that it becomes a social and public policy priority.

¹ Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale, The Lancet, 2016

² Combatting COVID-19's effect on children, [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), August 2020

The First Year, First Priority campaign's vision is that through public policies and spending, all families, and in particular those living with adversity, get the support they need to provide a healthy, safe and nurturing environment for their youngest children.

First Years, First Priority aims to take a holistic perspective, and address the five dimensions of early childhood development as described in the 'Nurturing Care Framework'.

First Years, First Priority aims to bring visibility to early childhood development and the situation of young children and their families across Europe, and to promote the policies and services that contribute to ensuring a fair start to every child.

When thinking about public policies that support early childhood development, most people think of investments in childcare - now widely referred to as 'early childhood education and care' (ECEC) covering education and care services for the age group from birth to 6. Such services are indeed extremely important for children's early learning and development, and they can contribute to reducing inequalities later in life. However, they are only part of the big picture. Their contribution can be severely compromised if they are not reinforced and complemented by other essential services which affect families' and children's lives.

The '**Nurturing Care Framework**'³, developed by WHO and endorsed by UNICEF and others, includes five key areas that must be considered in policies, investments and services that contribute to children's early childhood development:

- Health
- Nutrition
- Early Learning
- Responsive Caregiving
- Safety and Security

Many public policies contribute to creating the right conditions for children's development in each of these areas. It is important that these policies are coordinated and that professionals in different sectors collaborate with one another. Indeed, it is widely recognised that services that are highly coordinated, 'integrated' – i.e., address multiple dimensions of children's development – are the most effective in improving outcomes for children and families. However, the coordinated approach to early childhood public policies, funding and services is not yet mainstreamed in most early childhood systems in Europe. The dominant 'silo' approach leads to gaps and/or overlaps in addressing the rightful need of all children and families to benefit from support.

Poorly designed policies or policies that ignore the best interests of young children, especially the most vulnerable, can be a barrier to children's optimal development. This may be true of many fiscal, economic or employment policies which drive struggling families further to the margins of society.

³ Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential (2018) WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, Every Woman Every Child, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Early Childhood Development Action Network

2. WHAT ISSUES DOES THE CAMPAIGN AIM TO ADDRESS AND WHAT POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS DOES IT ADVOCATE FOR?

The campaign addresses the following areas that have a significant impact on young children's development:

- 1) child poverty
- 2) maternal and child health
- 3) parenting and family support
- 4) children's safety and security
- 5) early learning
- 6) fragmentation of policies and services.

Special attention will be paid to children under the age of three and to: children living in extreme poverty, Roma and Traveller children, children in (or at risk of entering) alternative care, migrant and refugee children (including those who are undocumented) and children with disabilities. In addition, other factors such as children's physical environment, housing and living in segregated settings, the challenges faced by newly arrived migrant families (including undocumented migrants) and the role of men and fathers in building a safe and nurturing environment for very young children, will be considered.

1. Child poverty

Even before Covid-19, child poverty and inequality were significant problems in Europe. In the EU, in 2019, 22.2% of children (nearly 18 million) lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion.⁴ With Europe headed into a deep recession, poverty levels are likely to escalate.

Poverty affects children's development in many ways. At its most basic, it can result in children going hungry, stunting their physical growth and development⁵. Poverty puts enormous pressure on parents making them less available to respond to young children's physical and emotional needs. From conception and continuing in the first months and years, children's bodies, brains and nervous systems are developing faster than at any other period of life. The period between pregnancy and the first three years of life is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations of optimum health, growth, and neuro-development across the lifespan are established⁶. This is a time when brain cells grow in abundance and stimulation is essential for the child's mental development and its cognitive capacity in adulthood. Prolonged exposure to adversity and toxic stress during this period can have lifelong consequences on health, learning, behaviour, and well-being across the life span.

Some population groups are more exposed to poverty. For example, a study published in 2016 by the Fundamental Rights Agency found that 80% of Roma were at risk of poverty, compared to 17% of the broader EU population⁷. Poverty is also more prevalent in families where the parents have low levels of education. Over 50% of children living in households where parents had no more than secondary education were at risk of poverty, compared to 7.5% of children whose parents had tertiary level education⁸. It reflects a trend that poverty is very often transmitted from one generation to the next. Children living in single-parent households or who have one or more parent with a migrant background are also

⁴ European Commission, Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, 24 March 2021

⁵ Children, Food and Nutrition. Growing well in a changing world, The State of the World's Children, UNICEF, 2019

⁶ Early childhood development. For every child, early moments matter, UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>

⁷ Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II): Roma - selected findings, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, November 2016

⁸ Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, Eurostat Statistics Explained, October 2020

more likely to experience poverty.

Poverty in early childhood is best addressed with integrated strategies, as articulated in the 2013 European Commission Recommendation on investing in children⁹:

- First, family incomes need to be protected. This includes ensuring that work pays, that essentials such as housing and childcare are affordable, and that minimum income schemes provide an adequate safety net.
- Second, services that support families with young children must be readily available and inclusive.
- Third, policies and services should be rights-based, meaning that the families and children they aim to serve should be involved in shaping their design and delivery, and monitoring how they work.

The campaign is calling for:

Governments to ensure that tackling poverty is a national priority, with multi-sector integrated approaches and comprehensive action plans that support children and families from the start, and increased public investment in early childhood services and support.

2. Maternal and child health

An estimated 500,000 women in the EU will go through their first months of pregnancy with no access to health services.¹⁰ Those particularly at risk of negative outcomes during pregnancy or birth are those with Roma background, migrant women, young mothers, and those with low socio-economic status and education.

Universal access to maternal health care is among the most cost-effective of public health measures. However, many women face barriers due to language, cultural sensitivities, or affordability. Women who have irregular migration status are particularly vulnerable, since access may be restricted by legal status. They may also have higher health risks due to the psychological and physical effects of the migration journey and/or experience of trauma in their home country.

Complications during childbirth, low birthweight, inadequate nutrition, postpartum depression, difficulty in breastfeeding are all consequences of poor maternal health and can result in significant setbacks for children's early development. In many countries there is also very limited paid maternity leave.

Periodic child health screenings, in infancy and early childhood, are also necessary to detect any possible health problems (e.g., hearing or eyesight loss) or developmental delays in the early stages and allow for early detection and intervention.

Solutions lie in ensuring universal access to primary health care as well as family planning, quality care during pregnancy and childbirth, access to skilled and qualified midwives, tackling institutional racism and discrimination in the healthcare sector, and adapting service provision to the needs of the community. Positive examples include expanding health visitation services, family – nurse partnerships, community health workers and encouraging better representation of minority groups in the workforce.

For example: [Case Study on Healthy Regions Initiative in Slovakia](#)

The campaign is calling for:

Universal access to quality maternal, newborn and child healthcare services, including family planning and pre- and post-natal care, and specific attention to the most marginalised groups, including Roma women, those living in poverty and homelessness, refugee and migrant women and those who are undocumented.

⁹ Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013. *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* (2013/112/EU)

¹⁰ Access to maternal health and midwifery for vulnerable groups in the EU, European Parliament, April 2019

3. Parenting and family support

The development of parenting skills has attracted considerable public policy attention in recent years. In 2019, the European Platform for Investing in Children produced a policy memo on 'parenting interventions' that refers to *any parent family-based education programme that aims to impact children's emotional, cognitive, behavioural and health-related outcomes through the improvement of parenting skill and the parent-child relationship*¹¹. A review of the evidence suggests that such interventions can have a positive impact on parenting consistency and reducing parental stress, therefore improving children's well-being and outcomes.

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign believes that such parenting support programmes can have a role in nurturing parent-child relationships and outcomes for children. However, we caution against parenting programmes being seen as a panacea as they do not address the root causes of poor parenting. Parental stress very often has structural causes linked to poverty, material deprivation, racism and discrimination and social exclusion. A public policy priority must therefore be to ensure adequate social protection systems that prevent family poverty and provide an effective safety-net. Particular attention must be paid to protecting single parents and large families who are more exposed to poverty and deprivation.

Read more: [Case Study on 'Triple P' Programme in the Netherlands](#)

The campaign is calling for:

Effective social protection measures that support *all* families and caregivers, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

4. Children's safety and security

A global study on the prevalence of violence against children carried out in 96 countries estimated that 1 billion children globally – over half of all children aged 2-17 years – experienced emotional, physical or sexual violence¹².

There is a growing body of evidence from neuroscience documenting the effects of exposure to violence on the brain development of young children¹³. Children under the age of 5 may be exposed to different types of violence including maltreatment or neglect, sexual violence or emotional or psychological violence for example by witnessing intimate partner violence.

Whilst there is no direct link between living in poverty and violence, families that face multiple adversities such as indebtedness, precarious or no work, food insecurity, social isolation or poor housing are more likely to suffer mental health problems, substance dependency and family violence.

Building a large body of evidence, the WHO, in partnership with other agencies, has developed seven strategies for ending violence against children, many of which are relevant for families with young children¹⁴:

- Implementation and enforcement of laws
- Norms and values
- Safe environments
- Parent and caregiver support
- Income and economic strengthening
- Response and support services
- Education and life skills

¹¹ Positive parenting interventions - Empowering parents with positive parenting techniques for lifelong health and well-being April 2019, European Platform for Investing in Children, Policy Memo

¹² Hillis S, Mercy J, Amobi A, et al. Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: a systematic review and minimum estimates. *Pediatrics*. 2016;137(3)

¹³ For example, The Harvard Center on the Developing Child: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

¹⁴ INSPIRE: seven strategies for ending violence against children, World Health Organisation, 2016

In a European context there are many positive examples of strength-based interventions that help families living in precarious situations such as those facing indebtedness, substance abuse issues or homelessness. Such interventions can prevent unnecessary separation of children from their families and placement in child protection services. There are promising practices in the fields of fathers' engagement, support for teenage parents and community-led initiatives that challenge cycles of violence.

Placement in residential care is particularly harmful for young children and can significantly disrupt their healthy development. For several decades, the European Union has supported deinstitutionalisation reforms in several parts of Europe which have historically relied on orphanages to care for children deprived of parental care. However much still remains to be done to prevent family separation and to enable healthy attachments with caring, supported adults. The transition from institutional to community- and family-based care is still incomplete, even in several Western European countries. To fully comply with the UN Guidelines on Alternative Care many countries still need to invest in effective family support and gatekeeping measures that will prevent unnecessary family separation, in addition to developing mother and baby homes, kinship and foster care services.

For example: [Case Study on Holding Tight Treatment System in Finland](#)

The campaign is calling for:

Governments to increase investment in measures that strengthen families experiencing adversity, prevent family separation, and support parents and guardians in their role as primary care givers for young children.
An end to institutionalisation of young children and development of alternative care options that provide a safe, secure and loving environment for young children, where possible within the child's biological family.

5. Early learning

Parents are the first educators of young children. A primary goal of public policy making should therefore be supporting parents and families to create a responsive, nurturing and stimulating environment for children to grow and thrive at home and opportunities for children to learn in services.

Nonetheless, over recent decades much policy attention has been paid to the development of formal and sometimes informal forms of childcare, mostly in response to women's increasing participation in the labour market.

Significant research is now available demonstrating how access to high quality ECEC can benefit young children, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the 2019 Eurydice report shows that access to ECEC for children under 3 is guaranteed only in 8 European countries. Out of the 31 million children under 6, only 5 million of them age under 3 attend some form of ECEC (34%)¹⁵. The literature shows that children from low socio-economic groups attend ECEC less than their affluent peers; and when they do, they often attend ECEC services of poorer quality. All EU Member States face lower enrolment rates for children from ethnic minorities, refugee children, children with special needs and children from poor families, compared to the general population.

Besides accessibility, the ECEC sector faces several other challenges to narrow the early learning gap for children growing up in poorer households. Among them, the lack of inclusiveness and the overall low quality of services are two major hindering factors. For many families, in particular those from ethnic minorities or migrant backgrounds, the ECEC settings can feel very unwelcoming and culturally alien. Moreover, the early childhood workforce is inadequately prepared, undervalued and unpaid. By increasing and valuing diversity in ECEC, as well as by improving the capacities and satisfaction of the workforce, the quality of early childhood experiences can significantly improve.

The EU includes access to affordable, high quality ECEC as an important policy priority of the European Pillar of Social Rights¹⁶. Thanks to the leadership of the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Member States have agreed on key principles of a

¹⁵ Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe, 2019 Edition, Eurydice Report, European Commission

¹⁶ Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights adopted in November 2017 foresees that: Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality

quality framework for ECEC. A toolkit¹⁷ for inclusive ECEC has been developed to support implementation in practice.

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign aims to accelerate uptake of these important policy developments and increase investment in high quality, inclusive ECEC services.

For example: [Case Study on Sure Start Programme in Hungary](#)

The campaign is calling for:

Governments to ensure high quality early childhood education and care is accessible and affordable for all families and young children, with a well-qualified, valued and supported workforce that can effectively support the most disadvantaged children and those with additional needs.

6. Fragmentation of early childhood policies and services

One of the most significant barriers to improving outcomes for young children and their families, in particular those in vulnerable situations, is the lack of joined-up thinking both in policy-making and in service planning and delivery. When problems are only addressed through one policy perspective, e.g., health, education, employment, social protection or another, they will fail to capture their complexity. For that reason, this campaign advocates for a comprehensive early childhood development approach, coordinated across different parts of government.

This approach has been endorsed by EU Member States. In June 2018, under the Bulgarian Presidency, the European Council adopted conclusions specifically focused on integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion. It stressed:

“Integrated and multi-sectoral policies are needed in order to support children's growth and health, to ensure early detection of difficulties and early interventions, including access to universal preventive health services and rehabilitation services, to guarantee quality early learning opportunities, to prevent neglect, violence and other risks. Good coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems is essential in that respect.”

It called on Member States to:

“further strengthen the coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems, as well as integrated and coordinated service delivery at local level”.

Furthermore, in its development of key principles for a quality framework for ECEC, the European Commission's working group found that the traditional split between notions of 'care' and 'education' (often leading to services for children under 3 and over 3 being managed by separate Ministries) resulted in poorer quality services, in particular for the younger age group.

By contrast they stated that *“fully integrated systems seem to offer more coherence across ECEC policy (e.g., regulation and funding, curriculum, workforce education/training and working conditions, monitoring and evaluation systems) as well as more resources allocated to younger children and their families”.*

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign is advocating for more joined up thinking by governments, as manifested in cross-sectoral coordination, overarching strategies or policy documents, and other coordination and cooperation mechanisms that work at different administrative levels.

Read more: [Case Study on moving from a split to a unitary ECEC system in Romania](#)

¹⁷ Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care. Providing high quality education and care to all young children, European Commission December 2020

The campaign is calling for:

Governments to adopt integrated, cross-departmental approaches to early childhood and ensure that early childhood development is considered in all policy areas affecting children's rights and their development and well-being.

3. CAMPAIGN'S PATHWAYS FOR ACHIEVING CHANGE FOR ALL YOUNG CHILDREN IN EUROPE

There are 2 main components to the campaign:

1. Building a European community of supporters

Five core values underpin this campaign. Organisations and individuals aligned with the campaign vision and common values are invited on a journey with the international partners and national coordinators to bring about change in public policies, in public investment and ultimately in the lives of young children and their families.

We recognise:

1. Early childhood development is a critical window of opportunity to tackle poverty and inequality.
2. Young children have rights that are laid out in the UNCRC and further developed in General Comment 7¹⁸.
3. That sustainable change comes from within communities. Parents, families and communities must be empowered and supported to bring about change that reflect their needs. Interventions must take a needs and strengths-based approach that identifies and builds on what works, encouraging lived-experience leadership and parental involvement.
4. Need for a system-wide social justice approach. It is essential to address structural inequalities, institutional bias, racism, and discrimination which entrench families and communities in cycles of poverty and deprivation. There must be better representation of minority groups in government and the public-sector workforce, so as to promote diversity and non-discrimination.
5. The importance of accountability. Good governance is essential, which requires clear recognition of roles and responsibilities among decision-makers and service providers. Civil society plays an essential role in acting as a watchdog towards government.

The campaign is a partnership between European networks and national NGOs. It aims to create a virtuous circle between grassroots activism and NGO services and national policy, legislative and public spending reforms. It aims to harness the positive policy and funding developments at EU level, by leveraging their influence on national policy and providing additional resources to trigger reforms.

2. Leveraging EU policies

The period of the campaign (2020 to 2024) provides a unique opportunity because the campaign's objective to ensure a fair start for every child in Europe aligns with several EU priorities.

Action Plan on European Pillar of Social Rights:

The European Commission has proposed an **Action Plan** to implement the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. Launched in November 2017 by the Presidents of the European Council, European Parliament and the European Commission, the Pillar sets out 20 principles to drive social progress across the EU. Many of these principles are relevant to the rights and well-being of children, including those addressing minimum income, access to essential services, work-life balance, education, housing and assistance for the homeless. Principle

¹⁸ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 7 (2005) Implementing child rights in early childhood

11 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** exclusively focuses on children, stating that: *“Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities”*.

The Commission's proposed Action Plan represents a significant step forward in strengthening social rights in the EU. It highlights the importance of ensuring children's access to services – such as early childhood education and care and proposes a target to lift at least 5 million children out of poverty by 2030.

While it recognizes that tackling poverty and exclusion requires prioritising children, a more ambitious target is needed. The campaign advocates for higher investments in early childhood development as part of the EU and EU Member States commitment to end extreme poverty by 2030 and reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion by 50%. This is in line with the commitment to implement the UN 2030 Agenda and, in particular, SDG 1, which aims at eradicating extreme poverty and halving child poverty in all its dimension by 2030.

EU Child Guarantee:

The **European Child Guarantee**¹⁹, launched by the European Commission on 24 March, is a landmark initiative, which recognises that addressing poverty and social exclusion requires universal access to key services. It is expected to take the form of a European Council Recommendation and to guarantee essential services for all ‘children in need’: early childhood education and care, healthy nutrition, adequate housing, access to healthcare, and education and school-based activities.

This renewed political commitment and policy framework will ensure more EU financial resources are directed towards national efforts to tackle child poverty and can play a vital role in supporting early childhood development.

EU strategy on the rights of the child (2021-24):

In March 2021, the European Commission also launched the **EU strategy on the rights of the child (2021-24)**²⁰, a comprehensive and ambitious Strategy that aims to protect and promote the rights of every child in the EU. The Strategy explicitly recognises that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living, and to equal opportunities, from the earliest stages of life. It also acknowledges that families and communities need to be provided with the support necessary for them to ensure children's well-being and development.

EU Funding:

Within the EU's next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, the **European Social Fund Plus** will support investments designed to tackle child poverty and to promote early childhood development. Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average will allocate at least 5% of their ESF+ resources to address child poverty. All other Member States must allocate an appropriate amount of their ESF+ resources to combat child poverty. All EU Member States are expected to develop national anti-poverty strategies, with a specific focus on child poverty.

Under Next Generation EU, the largest EU stimulus package in its history, the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** will support national recovery plans. Member States should use EU funding available under the Facility to tackle child poverty and social exclusion and implement the Child Guarantee, with a specific focus on children's earliest years.

Other EU funds can also be applied to investments that contribute to tackling inequality in early childhood including: the European Regional Development Fund, the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, Erasmus Plus, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural

¹⁹ Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, European Commission, 24 March 2021

²⁰ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, EU strategy on the rights of the child, European Commission, 24 March 2021

Development, and funding in the field of healthcare.

Other significant EU initiatives:

There are several other EU policy agendas prioritised by the Von der Leyen Commission (2019-2024) that will impact policies and investment in early childhood development. These include but are not limited to:

- Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030
- EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030
- EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025
- EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse (2020-2025)
- New Pact on Migration and Asylum
- Towards a European Health Union

The *First Years, First Priority* campaign will track these key policy agendas through the lens of early childhood development and vulnerability resulting from socio-economic status, ethnicity, disability or migration status.

Our aim is to ensure political pressure and funding from the EU drives progress across Europe, creating a mutually reinforcing agenda between EU policies and funding and national reforms and implementation, in the interest of ensuring *all* children in Europe can have the best start in life.

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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 programs and services connects the 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 programs 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 organization 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 organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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