

Early Childhood Development in Europe: focus on integrated and quality services for all

Taken from
*Unequal Childhoods: Rights on paper
should be rights in practice*
Eurochild 2025 flagship report
on children in need across Europe.



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On 20 November 2025 - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Unequal Childhoods: Rights on paper should be rights in practice". The report is based on information provided by 84 Eurochild members and contributors in 36 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. The Committee 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.

Several countries have implemented positive initiatives that provide vital support to infants, young children, their families and caregivers. However, early childhood services often remain fragmented, insufficient and under-funded, highlighting the need for an integrated approach with cross-sector coordination. Despite investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC), participation gaps remain, especially for the most disadvantaged children. A shortage of ECEC places and of qualified professionals hinders progress. In most countries there is a lack of disaggregated data on early childhood development, which limits the ability of policymakers and service providers to design and implement effective interventions.

Findings from Eurochild members

1. Positive interventions that support early childhood development

Several countries across Europe recognise the crucial importance of early childhood development, with clear policies, services and initiatives that aim to provide support for young children and their families and caregivers, from pregnancy and infancy.

Albania's National Programme for Early Childhood Development (2022–2026), is a multi-sector programme that aims to guarantee the healthy, inclusive, and equitable development of all children aged 0–6. It integrates health, nutrition, early education, parenting support, and social protection services and targets the most vulnerable children, especially those from Roma, Egyptian, rural, and low-income families.

Austria has early support interventions for children in their early years. Family support workers provide free and confidential assistance to families. They help to strengthen parent-child relationships, and, if necessary, seek out suitable additional support services. The support is free of charge and confidential from pregnancy until a child's third birthday.

Belgium's Flanders has several initiatives that support children and families in early childhood. 'Houses of the Child' provide support and advice on parenting and early childhood development, with a basic service for all parents and an additional service for families in vulnerable situations. Child and Family Support Centres provide short-term, intensive guidance to families with young children who are at risk of parenting breakdown. Their early intervention includes home-based coaching, parental skills training, and psycho-social support.

Bulgaria's National Health Strategy 2030 includes important goals such as improving the reach, access and quality of maternal and infant healthcare, with a focus on overcoming regional disparities, boosting the healthy habits of mothers-to-be, and improving the professional qualifications of health specialists. However, a new annual plan for the promotion of early childhood development has yet to be adopted and a long-term national vision for early childhood has not been developed.

In **Croatia**, the development of the National Early Childhood Intervention Plan for 2025–2030 is underway. This supports an early intervention system based on cross-sector cooperation, with an emphasis on regional equity. In **Cyprus**, a new strategy is being developed for children aged 0–3 and there have also been subsidies for pre-school education and care for those in need.

In **Denmark**, municipal home-visiting programmes by health nurses provide early screening, parenting support and referrals during a child's first years.

In **Finland**, family centres bring together various services that promote the well-being, health, growth and development of children, young people, and families, including early intervention. **Estonia's** *Perepesa*, community-based centres for parenting and family support, offer services from pregnancy until children reach school age. Parents have access to training, counselling, peer discussions and psychological support, while children are cared

for in a safe and supportive environment. *Perepesa* centres ensure that families can access essential information, guidance, and assistance in one place. Eurochild's member in Estonia, the Estonian Union for Child Welfare, highlights the need to prioritise the expansion and funding of these centres, as they have proven to be an effective, community-based model of support.

In **France** a focus on the '1000 premiers jours' ('the first 1000 days') aims to promote understanding and awareness of the importance of early childhood, and provides a range of support measures for parents.

In **Hungary**, programmes led by the Hungarian Maltese Charity Service provide effective interventions for young children and their families in disadvantaged communities. A notable example is their early childhood development and parenting support work in segregated or severely deprived settlements. In **Kosovo**, CONCORDIA provides inclusive early childhood education in two community-based centres, serving some of the most disadvantaged children. The programme is socially inclusive and tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable families.

Ireland has allocated €25.2 million for the first two years of the Equal Start programme – a government initiative to help disadvantaged children participate in early learning and childcare. This will include an Enhanced Nutrition Programme in Equal Start priority settings. However, Eurochild's member in Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance, stresses the need for further investment for the programme to reach its potential.

In **Italy**, 'Born to Read' (Nati per Leggere) promotes family reading for children aged 0–6 in over 2,000 Italian municipalities, involving paediatricians, librarians, educators, and volunteers. Free nurseries ('Nidi Gratis') in the Tuscany Region ensures free access to nurseries for families that qualify for the scheme, funded by the European Social Fund Plus and local budgets. Between 2022–2025, the participation in nurseries of children aged 0–3 increased to 58%, reducing inequalities. The programme has been replicated in other regions.

Malta's Early Intervention Service, a government-led and family-centred programme, supports children aged 0–5 who show signs of developmental delays or disabilities. It coordinates health and education professionals to provide developmental screening, home visits, therapy, and tailored support plans. Services are delivered across homes, childcare centres and schools.

Luxembourg's health policy for infants includes positive incentives for medical check-ups and preventive examinations up to a child's 4th birthday.

In **Germany**, the Childcare Quality Act provides €4 billion over two years to improve access and quality in ECEC. Investment has led to a 130% increase in ECEC places for children under three in the past 15 years. However, challenges remain, with unequal ECEC participation and a shortage of quality places. Germany has also expanded low-threshold early intervention services that connect child and youth welfare with healthcare, pregnancy

counselling, and basic material support before, during, and after birth. These services offer effective, cross-sector support for young children and their families.

Despite uneven coverage, **Latvia's** parental support initiatives, such as Riga Maternity Hospital's *When a Baby is Born* programme, provide assistance to parents and newborns. New initiatives are being developed, but access remains largely confined to larger cities, leaving rural families underserved. A pilot introducing midwife home visits during pregnancy and postpartum is promising and The Latvian Child Welfare Network recommends a nationwide rollout, along with systematic early childhood health screening.

CONCORDIA **Moldova** supports early childhood development through programmes such as the 'Parents' School', a Maternal Crisis Centre, and support groups for parent-child relationships. These initiatives provide early intervention, parental guidance and emotional support to young children and their families.

Portugal's National System of Early Childhood Intervention (Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce) is available to all children aged 0-6 with disabilities or developmental delays, and works through local multidisciplinary intervention teams to provide social, educational, and health support to children, their families and other caregivers.

In **Scotland**, Best Start Grants and Best Start Food offer some financial support from pregnancy until a child turns three. Children also benefit from regular child health reviews - at birth, at 6-8 weeks, at 13-15-months, at 27-30 months, and 4-5 years. **Slovenia** also provides universal, free health checks (by paediatricians) for newborns, infants, and young children (at 2-6 months, 12 months, 3 years, and 5-6 years). Similarly, in **Turkey**, family physicians monitor early childhood development, with periodic developmental assessments, physical examinations and counselling for caregivers.

In **Serbia**, the one-time child and parental allowance for newborn children has been increased. The new Law on Financial Support to Families with Children provides for financial support when a child is born.

In **Romania**, the Minimum Service Package pilot programme offers home visits, integrated health, education and social protection services through community teams made up of social workers, community nurses and school counsellors. This initiative supports the prevention of family separation, provides care, nutrition, vaccination, and access to early education, and has reduced the risk of social exclusion for families in disadvantaged areas. Eurochild members in Romania recommend the extension of the Minimum Service Package nationally, and the introduction of a national home visiting programme for children aged 0-3 and for young or at-risk mothers.

In **Ukraine**, home visiting programmes provide support to families with young children through regular visits by trained professionals. They offer parenting education, developmental screenings, and resources to promote healthy child development and family well-being. Integrated early childhood centres offer comprehensive services that combine early education, healthcare, and social support for children and their families.

In **Wales**, the Flying Start programme provides support for families with children under four in disadvantaged areas, through childcare, health visiting support and speech/language provision. In addition, Wales will soon introduce a Baby Bundle scheme, targeted at families in Flying Start areas of disadvantage.

2. Investing in early intervention, cross-sector support and integrated services for children's early years

Eurochild members in several countries stressed the need for more investment in early intervention and preventive family and parenting support, as well as the importance of a network of integrated, cross-sector services for young children and their caregivers. One-stop hubs for access to early childhood information, services and support were also highlighted as useful and needed.

Eurochild members in **Greece** emphasised the need to develop home visiting services and expand and improve early intervention services. Eurochild members in **Germany** highlighted the importance of strengthening psycho-social and early intervention support, including for postnatal depression. In **Denmark**, Eurochild members emphasised the need to strengthen early detection and cross-sector support, particularly for children with developmental delays or psycho-social risks, and the need for coordinated services between health, education, and social sectors to ensure early and sustained support for young children and their families.

Children in **Wales** highlight the need for greater investment in local community hubs for all families, to enable them to access a range of joined-up services, from conception, and to support the healthy development of babies and young children. Similarly, the Eurochild member in **Latvia** recommends a one-stop agency to provide families with information on available services and integrated support, alongside a unified preventive system for early detection of risks to children's and parents' health.

3. Obstacles to children's participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Despite efforts on children's participation in quality ECEC, ongoing challenges hinder progress in many countries across Europe. Eurochild members highlighted existing barriers to children's participation in early learning and care, including fees and other costs, insufficient places in facilities and insufficient staff. A lack of inclusive infrastructure and of qualified personnel to support children with disabilities was also highlighted in several countries.

Unequal access and barriers to ECEC participation

Unequal participation in quality ECEC remains a key issue, with a lack of sufficient places in ECEC settings in most countries and other barriers to children's enrolment. Fees, hidden costs and a lack of transport options still present obstacles to participation in ECEC for many children. Increased public investment in ECEC is needed to ensure access to quality ECEC services for all children, including the most disadvantaged.

In **Croatia**, there is a need for more state funding across all cities and municipalities and to ensure universally accessible, quality early learning programmes.

In **Albania**, despite ongoing efforts, access to nurseries and pre-schools remains unequal across the country, particularly in rural areas and among Roma, Egyptian, and low-income communities. Distance and a lack of transport options were cited as a barrier to ECEC participation in some countries, including the **Netherlands, Romania, Serbia** and **Kosovo**.

Eurochild members in **Denmark** highlight the need to ensure equal access to high-quality ECEC by increasing funding, especially in disadvantaged areas.

In **Moldova**, there is limited availability of ECEC services in rural areas, and high costs for families are also a barrier.

In **Switzerland**, despite subsidies, early education and childcare are expensive and not universally subsidised, creating barriers for children from disadvantaged households, especially those in single-parent, low-income and migrant families.

In **Romania**, participation in quality ECEC services is still limited, especially among those from vulnerable backgrounds. Hidden costs are a barrier for many families. Although in theory services are free, parents have to pay for school supplies, meals, and optional activities, and not all families benefit from financial support for ECEC. There are few nurseries and kindergartens in rural areas and in disadvantaged communities, and even in urban areas places are insufficient to meet growing demand.

In **Germany**, despite increased investment in ECEC, challenges remain. Despite a legal entitlement from age one, participation is unequal: children with highly educated parents, working mothers, or without a migration background are more likely to attend. Access is further limited by shortages of quality places (especially for children under-three), by staff shortages, gaps in rural areas and high costs.

In **Italy**, there is a need to expand free early childhood services for children aged 0–3. Currently, only 37% of children under three attend early childhood education services.

Some children face particular barriers to accessing quality ECEC. In **Finland**, there are concerns about participation rates for children whose mother tongue is not Finnish and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In **Hungary** there is growing segregation in kindergartens attended by Roma children, and a lack of inclusion and integration of children with special needs. Cultural and language barriers were identified as obstacles to ECEC participation in **Flanders**, Belgium. In **Slovenia**, the Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth cited cultural and language barriers for children from Roma communities and from migrant backgrounds as one of the main obstacles to participation in quality ECEC, along with fees (which affect low-income or socially disadvantaged families, despite the fact that public ECEC is subsidised).

In **Romania** discrimination against Roma and disabled children means there are often stigmatised, segregated or rejected. There is a lack of inclusion specialists in many units and no inclusive educational culture in the ECEC system. In **Kosovo**, despite a significant

increase in investment in ECEC, inequalities are striking, with disproportionately lower enrolment rates for children in Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, children living in poverty and children with disabilities.

Positively, in efforts to improve Roma children's access to early education in **Albania**, the 'Every Roma Child in Kindergarten' initiative, led by UNICEF, the Child Rights Centre Albania and others, monitors trends and encourages local governments to improve by recognising and sharing best practices. Despite ongoing efforts, access to nurseries and pre-schools remains unequal across the country, particularly in rural areas and among Roma, Egyptian, and low-income communities.

The importance of trained staff in ECEC settings

The insufficient number of qualified and trained staff in ECEC facilities remains a challenge in many countries. In **Denmark**, staff shortages and inconsistent quality (despite legislation on minimum staff-child ratios) mean that many institutions are understaffed, affecting children's well-being and learning. Insufficient ECEC staff was also a concern raised by Eurochild members in **Austria, Serbia, Hungary and Ukraine**.

In particular, organisations in several countries highlighted the lack of qualified staff and infrastructure to ensure inclusive learning environments and support children with disabilities in ECEC settings. In **Denmark**, services are often not adapted to the needs of children with disabilities or with different linguistic/cultural backgrounds. Ariel Foundation International in **Switzerland** pointed to the need for inclusive practices that support children with disabilities and multilingual backgrounds. In **Estonia**, families with children with special educational needs report particular difficulties accessing suitable placements. In **Latvia**, pre-schools lack sufficient specialists (speech therapists, psychologists, teaching assistants) to ensure inclusive learning environments. In **Croatia**, one of the main obstacles to children's participation in quality ECEC is insufficient adaptation and support for children from vulnerable groups.

In **Greece**, Eurochild members referred to insufficient inclusive infrastructure and support services within mainstream ECEC settings for children with disabilities. Eurochild members in **Germany** also highlighted gaps in inclusion and service integration, with persistent challenges in the provision of inclusive care. Despite government efforts to progressively extend free enrolment in crèches, **Portugal** still has a lack of human resources to effectively include children with special needs.

In countries including **Albania, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Malta**, Eurochild members stressed the need for professional training and unified qualifying standards in early learning settings, including pedagogical frameworks and continuous professional development for early years educators.

Positively, **Spain** has adopted a roadmap to improve early childhood care, to be implemented by 2030. This includes the improvement of the quality of early care services, and continuous professional training for staff, representing a major step forward in ensuring early care for all children.

4. More data needed to inform policy and practice

In almost all countries there is a need for disaggregated data on early childhood development and services. Such data is needed to develop policies and action plans, to understand disparities in access to quality early childhood services and monitor progress. The lack of disaggregated data limits the ability of policymakers and service providers to design and implement targeted, effective interventions, and to tailor support for the most disadvantaged children and families. By contrast, in **Scotland**, data on early childhood development is disaggregated by deprivation level, sex, ethnicity, looked after child status and whether English is the main language spoken at home or whether the child is bi/multilingual.

In **Bulgaria**, data on early childhood development is scarce and fragmented. There is no data on poverty and social exclusion for children under three, no data for children with unmet medical needs, and no disaggregated data on ECEC quality or enrolment.

In **Croatia** there is no data on the number of children with developmental risks and difficulties, or on how many children are included in the support system, on service provision and waiting lists.

In **Moldova** there is a need for more disaggregated data on access to services by region, disability status, and socio-economic background in order to tailor policies and programmes to vulnerable groups. In **Romania**, more detailed disaggregated data on early childhood development is needed to inform effective and equitable policies and interventions.

In **Hungary** there is a great need for more disaggregated and up-to-date data on early childhood development, to inform policies and programmes. Data should be disaggregated by age group (especially 0–3 years), geographic location, socio-economic background, Roma ethnicity, disability status, and access to services. There is also a need for indicators on developmental delays, participation in ECEC, service quality, and on early intervention and home-visiting programmes. Such data would enable more targeted interventions, and help to identify underserved populations and monitor progress in reducing inequalities in early childhood outcomes.

In **Slovenia** existing national statistics (e.g. on pre-school enrolment or health check-ups) often do not reflect inequalities across regions, and among disadvantaged groups. Without more detailed data, it is difficult to assess who is being left behind and whether services are reaching the children who need them most.

In **Germany** there is a need to improve disaggregated data on quality, outcomes, equal opportunities, and family support needs, while in **Italy** there is a strong need for disaggregated data to understand inequalities in access to services and in service quality, in order to design targeted and inclusive policies.

There is a significant lack of accessible, integrated data on early childhood development in **Belgium**, particularly in **Flanders**. Currently, data is managed at local, regional or organisational levels, making it difficult to compare, track impact, or shape policy.

Some of the data identified by Eurochild members as necessary to inform early childhood policies and programmes includes:

- Health and developmental screenings and outcomes, disaggregated by age, gender, socio-economic status, and early intervention status (to assess early identification and referral effectiveness) – such as the participation of children in developmental screenings at family health centres, in home visits, and in community-based early childhood programmes, to highlight service gaps.
- Parental and family context, including socio-economic status, in order to assess how family income and social background affect access to services and outcomes for children.
- Parenting support and service use - by family type, poverty level, parental education, and region (to understand reach and gaps in home visiting and parenting programmes).
- Disaggregated data on enrolment and attendance in ECEC by region, socio-economic status, family background, ethnicity, migrant status, and disability, to identify under-represented groups.
- Data on the quality of ECEC services, such as staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios and the availability of inclusive education.
- Disaggregated data on access to services according to locality, ethnicity and disability, including data on access to services in urban and rural areas to identify geographical disparities.
- The frequency of quality interactions between caregivers and children.
- Referral rates to services for early identification, special education and rehabilitation.
- Children aged 0-6 in institutional care and foster care.

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 comprehensive and cross-sector approach to early childhood development, with a range of integrated and coordinated services that can support all young children and their families, especially those who are most marginalised.
3. Focus investment on early and local interventions, with community-based services and hubs where families and caregivers can access early childhood services and support.
4. Increase public investment to expand free, inclusive, high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children, including those aged 0-3.
5. Invest in ECEC staff who can provide tailored support for children with disabilities or who face particular disadvantages, and ensure inclusive learning.
6. Ensure that ECEC provision is of high quality, with national 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.

Conclusion

Many countries recognise that children's early years are a crucial time for their healthy development and well-being, and have invested in **policies and programmes that support children in infancy and early childhood**. There are several **positive interventions and initiatives** across a range of very different countries, including family centres, national action plans, home visiting programmes, periodic health checks and the expansion of early learning and care facilities.

However, **challenges** remain, and there is an ongoing need to **invest in children's early years**, through **comprehensive, integrated and cross-sector services** for families with young children – especially those facing the greatest disadvantage and social exclusion. Early intervention and support is key. **Addressing child poverty, social exclusion and discrimination** – including in early childhood – remains an urgent priority.

Despite the expansion of **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** facilities, many countries face a **shortage of childcare places and of staff**, especially staff that can provide tailored support for children with disabilities or particular needs. This highlights the need to

continue to invest in a professional workforce that can **ensure quality care and inclusive education** for all children.

Across most countries there is a need for **disaggregated data on early childhood development**, to enable the design and implementation of targeted, effective policies and programmes, and to identify inequalities and service gaps.

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