Country
FACT SHEET 2020*



SPAIN

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* The information provided in the country fact sheets reflects the situation by end of August 2020.

first years first priority

A FAIR START FOR every CHILD IN EUROPE

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Spain has made adequate efforts over the past year to deliver on early childhood development policies and to support families with young children. ●●○○○*

Spain has a national law or act guaranteeing access to basic ECD services in Education, Health, Nutrition, and/or Social and Child Protection for all children under 6. NO

Spain had a National Action Plan for Children and Young People in force for the period 2013-2016. However, it has not been renewed since. 0A new commitment is urgently needed and should improve on the previous one by including better provisions for coordination between different relevant public authorities, and by paying more attention to the local perspective.

Despite the lack of a comprehensive strategy on early childhood development (ECD), individual policies and pieces of legislation provide for certain elements and rights:

- In the area of **child protection**, two new laws approved in 2015 reformed the legal framework governing the system of protection for children and adolescents.
- **Education** in Spain is managed by the regions. For the moment, there is no universal access to public education under three years of age. It is in place for children between three and six years old, but is not compulsory. In 2019, the central government in consultation with the regions put forward an eight-year plan to extend early childhood education and care to all children under the official school age of six. The target is approached differently by the regions - some plan to use subsidies for private schools (La Rioja), others to give direct grants to families (Andalusia), and some others to invest in public schools and remove tuition fees.
- **Healthcare** for children from birth to six years is guaranteed. However, improvements are still needed in the area of Early Childhood Intervention – a national law on this is expected to be approved in the coming months, according to the Coalition Government Agreement[1]. The approval of this law has been one of Plataforma de Organizaciones de Infancia's main demands to the Spanish Government in the past years, and the organisation will now closely monitor its effective implementation.
- **Family support mechanisms** are available, but limited. Currently only provided to the families below the severe poverty threshold, they support the most vulnerable, but leave out families living in moderate poverty. Therefore, additional support measures for other poverty thresholds are needed.

According to the respondent organisation, the **two biggest challenges** in Spain from the perspective of early childhood development are:

1. **Promoting education for children under three years of age, as quality and access to these services is still a significant challenge, especially for families with lower incomes.**
2. **Supporting families in vulnerable situations, and promoting work-life balance.**

* This country sheet is based on a contribution from national coordinators, including the ratings - between ○○○○○ (worst) and ●●●●● (best)

1 https://www.psoe.es/media-content/2019/12/30122019-Coalici%C3%B3n-progresista.pdf

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE DURING THE FIRST WAVE

The COVID-19 crisis had a serious impact on children and families, often turning existing difficulties into even stronger impediments:

1. It revealed the existing weakness of government policies on **balancing work and family life**. The closing of schools and other educational institutions has exposed families to excessive burdens, while no support was offered to families who were forced to combine their jobs with taking care of their children. This has been especially serious for more vulnerable families, such as single-parent families, of which 50% live in a situation of poverty and exclusion. Solutions such as guaranteed paid leave were not offered.
2. **Social services were not operating during the lockdown**, which had a strong negative impact especially on families with children in vulnerable situations with an acute need for support.

The government introduced a range of measures impacting families with young children:

- **Plan Educa en Digital**[2] (●●●●○) - a programme aimed to reduce the digital divide in the education system, was approved in June 2020. It involves the provision of half a million devices to education centres in the country that would be distributed to children in vulnerable positions.
- **Minimum Vital Income** (●●●○○) - despite the approval by the Spanish Congress of this support mechanism for families in vulnerable positions, some obstacles involving bureaucratic issues are hampering a full and appropriate implementation of this measure.
- **Temporary Lay-off, social protection measures** (●●●●○)
- **Measures facilitating flexible work hours** (●●●○○)
- **Food Scholarships** (●●○○○)

EUROPEAN SEMESTER

The 2020 Country Report covers a range of issues related to ECD. It recognises the positive developments in participation rates in early childhood education and care, which is now considerably above the EU average. However, the Country Report should pay more attention to the fact that despite the positive statistics, children in vulnerable situations still have difficulties in accessing ECEC services. Reasons include economic (lack of places, insufficient aid, unaffordable costs), bureaucratic and communicative (complex procedures), political-organisational (rigid schedules and models that do not adapt to the needs of the families), and ideological and cultural (benefits of early education are not known, diversity management and inclusion of minorities is very weak) barriers. Large regional disparities also persist in key education and social indicators, particularly in the early age groups. The government should be encouraged to dedicate more resources and efforts to create better-integrated services, and support access to quality early learning.

2 https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/prensa/actualidad/2020/06/20200616-educaendigital.html

As discussed above, family support mechanisms for different poverty thresholds are needed, especially in the view of the current economic crisis. A call for introducing better maternity and paternity leave in the framework of the national labour and social policies is also an extremely important measure. Parents should be able to spend the first months of their child's life – a crucial time for a child's development – with their child and be certain that their rights as employees are protected. The Country Report should therefore also assess the national provisions on parental leave and family support, and provide recommendations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a new strategic framework on ECD, with special attention to coordination mechanisms between the different authorities;
- Ensure universal access to quality early childhood education and care;
- Develop Public System of Early Childhood Intervention with free-access regardless the place of residence as stated in the Spanish Coalition Government Agreement;
- Aim to decrease regional disparities in terms of education and healthcare;
- Develop better family support mechanisms to reach more families in vulnerable positions, and from different poverty thresholds;
- Improve maternity and paternity leave provisions to safeguard the rights of parents, and allow them to adequately take care of their children in the first months of life;
- Guarantee paid leave to families in vulnerable situations who need to take care of their children due to the pandemic;
- Ensure access to services despite the pandemic.

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OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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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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