



**QUALITY IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE**
COFACE POSITION PAPER

THE FAMILY DIMENSION OF IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. To ensure that all families have access to quality early childhood education and care, national systems across the EU should adopt a progressive universalism approach that:**
 - ensures services are progressively subsidised based on families' financial ability to pay;
 - prioritises public funding models, allowing for free or income-adjusted fees that ensure equitable access for all families;
 - addresses cultural and bureaucratic barriers by simplifying enrollment processes and providing multilingual support to migrant families.
- 2. To provide a consistent and supportive environment for children and families throughout the early years, ECEC national systems should:**
 - develop strategies that facilitate smooth educational transitions from home care to formal care, and from ECEC settings to primary school;
 - promote pedagogical and professional continuity across stages, standardising ECEC curricula and encouraging communication and coordination between ECEC and primary settings;
 - actively engage parents and families in transition processes, recognising school/family 'alliances' as a crucial factor for successful transitions.
- 3. To facilitate the consolidation of local networks of family support, national policy frameworks should focus on:**
 - leveraging ECEC settings as central nodes within local, multi-sectoral service networks to provide comprehensive family support;
 - promoting integrated strategies for family support at the local level, with ECEC at the centre, in close cooperation with other services, including healthcare, parental guidance, social, and recreational services;
 - incentivising and managing the transformation of ECEC facilities to enhance their role in local networks, enabling them to offer additional services such as guidance, mentoring, and information sharing for families.

4. To promote parental involvement in early childhood education, which has been shown to strongly predict positive outcomes for children, ECEC systems should:

- prioritise the inclusion of parental engagement in national ECEC quality guidelines, mandating services to foster continuous, inclusive family involvement throughout early childhood stages;
- encourage the local implementation of inclusive parental engagement programs, such as culturally sensitive outreach initiatives adaptable to diverse family contexts;
- support the development of local parental guidance initiatives targeting low-income households and families in vulnerable conditions, addressing economic, linguistic, and time constraints to ensure engagement outcomes across the socio-economic spectrum.

5. To foster a culture of child participation, both at ECEC centres and at home, local ECEC authorities should:

- encourage ECEC leaders to include child participation in decision-making, supporting children in rule-setting and activity choices to boost autonomy and self-confidence;
- improve partnerships between ECEC centres and families designed to help parents foster participatory practices at home, enhancing children's confidence and learning continuity.

6. To improve the competence and stability of the workforce employed in ECEC settings, national and local authorities must:

- address endemic staff shortages in the sector and invest heavily in workforce development, expanding continuous professional development programmes;
- promote the establishment of clear leadership structures and implement organised leadership training programmes in ECEC settings;
- prioritise professional development programmes aimed at enhancing the ECEC workforce's ability and confidence to reach out to, engage with, and cooperate with families;
- establish national mandatory thresholds for child-to-staff ratios in ECEC settings to ensure educators can provide personalised attention and support.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has emerged as a critical priority within European and national states policy frameworks, underscoring its pivotal role both in shaping children's developmental trajectories and contributing to broader societal advancement and the reconciliation of family and professional life. The 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights affirmed the right of all children to quality and affordable ECEC, aligning with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which aims for universal access to high-quality early development, care, and education by 2030.

In the European context, significant advancements have been observed within the past twenty years, notably focused on the objective of expanding ECEC coverage rates. Such progress has been largely attributed to the efforts of Member States towards attaining the Education and Training 2020 benchmarks and the 2002 Barcelona targets, which were recently updated within the framework of the 2022 European Care Strategy.¹

While the development and advancement of the supply side have been the primary driver of progress, recent years have witnessed a noteworthy shift towards enhancing the quality of ECEC provision. This shift has been further propelled by the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC, which presents a European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care in the Annex. This framework largely echoes the proposal for a quality framework for the sector produced by DG EAC of the European Commission in 2014. While the expansion of ECEC access remains a pressing challenge, the emerging

discourse has placed a substantial emphasis on the critical role of high-quality services in realising positive outcomes for children, especially from families in vulnerable situations such as single-parent families, migrant families, large families and families with children with disabilities.²

The benefits of participating in high-quality ECEC are significant. Research shows that investments in the early years led to enhanced educational attainment, better labour market outcomes, and improved social cohesion. ECEC can also contribute to lower crime rates, reduced social and educational interventions, and the development of more inclusive societies. These benefits extend beyond short-term educational gains, encompassing long-term advantages such as improved economic productivity and overall societal well-being. By fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development in children, ECEC lays a crucial foundation for lifelong learning and achievement.³

The benefits of ECEC extend beyond individual outcomes, offering societal advantages like reduced welfare dependency, lower healthcare costs, and greater social equity. ECEC services, when responsive to children's needs, are particularly beneficial for those from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds. To fully realise these outcomes, however, high-quality settings are essential. The presence of qualified educators, sensitive and responsive interactions, and a rich learning environment are vital in fostering children's development. As such, investing in high-quality ECEC is not only a matter of accessibility but also a critical step towards ensuring long-term societal benefits.⁴

The growing emphasis on quality in ECEC in recent years can largely be attributed to strong grassroots advocacy and debate.

Organisations representing families have championed a balanced approach that prioritises service quality in conjunction with expansion. These organisations have undertaken campaigns to promote a sharpened focus on quality, contending that expanding service provision without ensuring high standards can jeopardise the efficacy of ECEC services.⁵

The concept of quality in ECEC is inherently multidimensional, calling for an integrated approach that encompasses both structural and processual elements. Structural factors, such as staff-to-child ratios and access to educational resources, must be carefully balanced with processual elements, including the nature of educator-child interactions and the overall learning environment.⁶

A crucial yet often under-emphasised component of this “quality mix” is the interplay between services and families. With increasing participation in formal early years programmes across Europe, these services have the potential not only to shape children’s developmental trajectories through direct interactions, but also, importantly, through partnerships with families. This foundational relationship can have a massive impact on continuity in children’s experiences across ECEC and home environments. Given the substantial impact of family characteristics on children’s educational progress, parental and child involvement—and, critically, the ability of ECEC settings and staff to build and sustain partnerships with families over time—emerges as a core element of high-quality ECEC provision.⁷

Parental and child engagement is indeed a vital component of high-quality ECEC. Effective communication and collaboration between parents and educators bridge the home and school environments, creating a cohesive learning experience that bolsters children’s social skills, reduces behavioral

challenges, and enhances school readiness. When parents are informed and actively involved, they can reinforce educational goals at home, providing continuity in children’s development. However, structural and cultural barriers often hinder those collaborations, underscoring the need for targeted guidelines and professional development focused on inclusive communication and cultural sensitivity.⁸

Parental and child engagement in ECEC is a multidimensional concept that encompasses involvement at home, within ECEC settings, and in home-daycare/preschool communication. At home, engagement includes activities that stimulate cognitive development, such as reading together, helping with tasks, and creating a learning-friendly environment. Within ECEC settings, engagement involves participation in activities and collaboration with educators, supported by ongoing home-service communication to align educational goals.⁹ Additionally, when ECEC serves as a coordinated hub for services like parental guidance, home visitation, social assistance, pediatrics, and maternal healthcare, it can strengthen engagement by facilitating families’ access to vital resources.

ECEC services must also align with parental leave policies to eliminate the “childcare gap” that often arises between the end of adequately paid parental leave and the commencement of state supported ECEC entitlements. This gap can pose significant challenges for families, forcing them to choose between delaying return to the workforce and settling for suboptimal childcare options that are either different or of lower quality than expected, or too costly for the family budget. By ensuring that these two frameworks work in tandem, ECEC services can enhance parental autonomy and involvement,

ultimately fostering a more supportive environment for children’s development. A cohesive strategy that integrates family engagement and policy alignment is essential for achieving high-quality ECEC outcomes.¹⁰

This position paper analyses how the quality of interaction between ECEC services and families can enhance educational outcomes and the overall experience for both children and parents. Through a thorough exploration of these critical intersections, the paper makes recommendations in six key areas, aiming to underscore the vital role that family engagement plays in achieving and sustaining high-quality early childhood education and care.

1.

HIGH QUALITY ECEC SYSTEMS ARE AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE, AND ACCESSIBLE TO ALL FAMILIES

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To ensure that all families have access to quality early childhood education and care, national systems across the EU should adopt a progressive universalism approach that:


- ensures services are progressively subsidised based on families' financial ability to pay;
- prioritises public funding models, allowing for free or income-adjusted fees that ensure equitable access for all families;
- addresses cultural and bureaucratic barriers by simplifying enrollment.

High quality ECEC systems must be available, affordable, and accessible to all families in order to truly fulfill their purpose. This means ensuring that those services are not only economically feasible for families, but also easily accessible in terms of location and enrollment processes. The availability and quality of these programmes is particularly important for vulnerable families and children, as emphasised by the 2019 Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC. The framework advocates for a universal approach to meeting the diverse needs of all families, promoting social inclusion and justice.

This requires that ECEC settings are not only welcoming and high-quality, but also structurally and culturally accessible, extending their reach to all families, including ones known for using services less. The use of early years services exhibits in this regard a clear pattern of social stratification across Europe. Despite a notable surge in enrollment rates since the

beginning of the century, this growth has failed to mitigate inequity within national ECEC systems. In fact, existing disparities have exacerbated, resulting in a widening gap between affluent and disadvantaged families.¹¹

Supply-side constraints of a 'structural' kind, such as affordability and availability, represent the main barriers to low-income households' access to services, whereas demand-side conditions, such as preferences linked to cultural traditions or conceptions of motherhood, while still important, play a lesser role in explaining the social gap in participation.¹² ECEC systems that are willing to implement structural reforms aimed at improving quality and availability, while simultaneously controlling costs for parents, are poised to achieve progress in inclusivity and equity within these services. This can also encompass embracing a range of multi-sectoral, multidisciplinary, and culturally sensitive initiatives.



A high-quality ECEC system ensures that services are available when families need them, supported by legislative arrangements that guarantee universal access. This is especially important for disadvantaged groups. Systems that do not enforce a universal entitlement, and in which access to publicly subsidised services is targeted to children from financially vulnerable households, may see uptake of these services become associated to a social stigma, ultimately leading to segregation and exclusion. Effective ECEC systems also rely on comprehensive national, regional, and local data to monitor participation and ensure efficient funding. Progress toward universal entitlement requires measures that highlight the value of ECEC services, with a focus on aligning parental leave frameworks and ECEC entitlement to ensure families have access when paid leave ends.¹³

Affordability remains a major barrier for many families seeking access to ECEC services. The funding model plays a significant role in determining parental fees, costs, and, consequently, the accessibility of these services. In countries with public funding available, ECEC programmes are often offered for free or with fees that are adjusted based on income, making them more accessible for low-income families. On the other hand, in systems where there is no guaranteed right to a place in ECEC, access to publicly subsidised services may be limited, placing extra burdens on families and potentially stigmatising them as “needy.” To promote equity, it is crucial to adopt a structural approach that provides services to the general population, either for free or with fees based on income, rather than solely targeting disadvantaged groups.¹⁴

Geographical accessibility is another important factor that affects access to ECEC services. The uneven distribution of services often leads to disparities, with some regions having better access than others. It is therefore important for high-quality ECEC services to be located in neighbourhoods where disadvantaged and ethnic minority families reside, in order to mitigate the effects of socioeconomic status on access. While ECEC provision should not exclusively target “at-risk” households, research

suggests that policies grounded in a rights-based framework are more effective than those based on needs or risk assessments. In situations of limited resources, policymakers may choose to prioritise investments in underprivileged areas.¹⁵

High-quality ECEC systems ensure not only geographical accessibility but also alignment between household flexibility needs and the organisational setup of local services. This requires a degree of customisation in ECEC delivery. Traditional ECEC services were mostly tied to supporting primary caregivers with childminding during a standard working day (8-hour shifts, 9-to-5, five days a week). Services that remain anchored to that model can fail to address “new reconciliation challenges” like family instability, varying work patterns (e.g., night shifts, unpredictable schedules), and the weakening of kinship and neighbourhood support. Today, a high-quality ECEC system must tackle these issues by offering flexible models and organisational adjustments, such as extended opening hours and more flexible entry/exit routines. Weekend and night-time care have also been piloted in some areas. Customisation should move beyond rigid timetables, and broader attendance options, including part-time programmes, need to become common practice to meet an increasingly diverse range of family needs.¹⁶

The bureaucratic and cultural accessibility of ECEC services can also pose barriers for families who may not be familiar with the system. Language barriers, understanding of procedures, waiting lists, and administrative priorities can unintentionally exclude children from low-income and migrant families. To ensure equal access for all families, it is essential for ECEC access policies to be carefully planned, particularly at the local level. This can begin with analysing the barriers that prevent children and from accessing these crucial services even though they might have and express the need and wish for using them.¹⁷

2.

HIGH QUALITY ECEC EMPLOY CONTINUOUS APPROACHES TO CARE AND EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To provide a consistent and supportive environment for children and families throughout the early years, ECEC national systems should:


- develop strategies that facilitate smooth educational transitions from home care to formal care, and from ECEC settings to primary school;
- promote pedagogical and professional continuity across stages, standardising ECEC curricula and encouraging communication and coordination between ECEC and primary settings;
- actively engage parents and families in transition processes, recognising school/family 'alliances' as a crucial factor for successful transitions.

To provide a consistent and supportive environment for children and families throughout their early years, ECEC systems must prioritise continuity across various stages—from 0-3 daycare, to 3-6 preschool, afterschool programmes, and the transition to primary education. Research consistently highlights the importance of seamless transitions between home, ECEC, and compulsory school education, which are critical for fostering positive educational outcomes and socio-emotional development.¹⁸ Across these stages, a holistic, integrated approach, that recognizes the educational value of care and the nurturing role of education across, can significantly enhance these transitions, mitigating the stress typically associated with entering new educational environments.¹⁹

Studies indicate that children often experience elevated cortisol levels during

the initial weeks of the academic year, demonstrating the stressfulness of these transitions. While some children adapt to this stress over time, others exhibit prolonged responses, a phenomenon that is not easily linked to specific socio-demographic factors. Notably, families of children with disabilities stand to benefit the most from continuity in pedagogical approaches, as these children are often more vulnerable to the challenges posed by transitions between different educational settings.²⁰

Engaging families effectively during these transitions can play a crucial role in alleviating stress and enhancing children's adaptation. When parents are actively involved in the transition process and are well-supported by ECEC services, they can become key actors in improving their children's experiences and facilitating smoother adjustments. Effective strategies include involving



parents in transition planning, providing them with clear information about the new educational settings, and ensuring that they feel welcomed and valued as partners in their children's educational journey. Such engagement not only helps in addressing the immediate stress associated with transitions but also fosters a sense of continuity and security for children.²¹

In broader terms, achieving such continuity requires ECEC systems to implement strategies aimed at reducing fragmentation between institutional segments, educational settings, and the diverse workforces involved. By fostering a coherent educational environment, a system can offset the negative effects of transitions across settings and ensure a smooth progression in children's learning and development. Organisational trends indicate that increased attention is being paid to transitions across various countries, with Ministries of Education increasingly assuming control over ECEC, thereby enhancing coordination between early years and primary education. However, decentralised governance often leads to significant variation in transition management practices, resulting in inconsistent experiences for children and families. Addressing these inconsistencies necessitates the development of national guidelines or frameworks that promote alignment and coordination among local systems, ensuring equitable access to high-quality transitions for all children.²²

Professional continuity is a crucial concept in addressing and bridging the gap between nursery educators, preschool staff and primary school teachers. Despite advancements in aligning qualification requirements and training opportunities, significant disparities persist in the roles, status, and working conditions of professionals across these educational stages,

which can hinder collaboration and continuity in children's educational experiences. Curriculum and pedagogical continuity are equally critical, ensuring that educational goals, instructional techniques, and learning strategies are harmonised across different levels. Overcoming the challenges posed by fragmented curricula and divergent pedagogical approaches requires integrated curriculum frameworks and opportunities for collaborative professional development. Ultimately, an emphasis on developmental continuity is paramount to ensuring that children's growth and learning are consistently supported throughout their educational journey.

3.

HIGH QUALITY ECEC SETTINGS AS NODES OF MULTISECTORAL FAMILY SUPPORT

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To facilitate the consolidation of local networks of family support, national policy frameworks should focus on:


- leveraging ECEC settings as central nodes within local, multi-sectoral service networks to provide comprehensive family support;
- promoting integrated strategies for family support at the local level, with ECEC at the centre, in close cooperation with other services, including healthcare, parental guidance, social, and recreational services;
- incentivising and managing the transformation of ECEC facilities to enhance their role in local networks, enabling them to offer additional services such as guidance, mentoring, and information sharing for families.

ECEC services are typically expected to fulfill two key functions: providing educational services and promoting work-life reconciliation. It is not surprising, then, that the quality of an ECEC system tends to be assessed based on its impact on these two operational aspects: a child's social-emotional, cognitive, and academic development, and the work-life balance of parents. Yet, from a family perspective, these services may be expected to play a much broader role - particularly during the perinatal phase and immediately beyond, where families experience a broad range of needs that are intricately intertwined, beyond reconciliatory support and stimulation for their child.

In this decisive juncture, ECEC systems can emerge as decisive nodes in the emergence and consolidation of local

networks of family support services, operating across multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, and social assistance. ECEC systems are particularly well-positioned to anchor these networks due to their continuous engagement with families, their extensive physical infrastructure, and their potential to act as a pivotal point of referral and coordination for a wide range of personal services of family support.²³

Such personal support services, targeting families with young children, may encompass a broad range of social provisions beyond early education and care practices, including parental guidance and parent-child support initiatives such as home visitations, social assistance, pediatrics, and maternal healthcare. When positioned as central elements within a multi-



sectoral local service offering, ECEC settings can take on an expanded and crucial role in shaping the distribution of care responsibilities within households, as well as to influence prevention strategies.

Despite their critical importance, most European countries have yet to develop coordinated delivery systems that effectively integrate these individual components into cohesive local, regional, or national frameworks. Families often encounter a fragmented policy landscape in which individual services are organised and delivered by distinct organisational units, complicating access and reducing service effectiveness. Recent evidence indicates a gradual shift toward greater coordination within family policy systems across Europe. This shift appears to stem from a growing recognition of the benefits of holistic, multi-sectoral cooperation in addressing emerging social risks, promoting personal autonomy, and fostering active citizenship.²⁴

ECEC systems are uniquely equipped to play a central role in these inter-sectoral networks. Their facilities, often more expansive than those of other social services, can be adapted to serve as hubs for various support activities, including parental guidance, consulting, mentoring, and information dissemination. The daily interactions between ECEC staff and families position these professionals as key actors in activating and guiding the use of additional services, including ones linked to health care. Unlike pediatric clinics or social service offices, ECEC centres have the capacity to repurpose parts of their space to support these functions, both during and after regular operating hours.²⁵

However, the ability of ECEC systems to serve as the linchpin of these multi-sectoral networks is contingent upon the public administration's capacity to incentivise and manage their evolution in this direction. The ongoing trend toward decentralised governance in ECEC, reflecting broader shifts towards New Public Governance, underscores the need for collaborative decision-making and integrated service delivery tailored to local needs. While traditional top-down quality assurance mechanisms are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by national frameworks with local oversight, the impact of this local governance on the quality of ECEC services requires further examination. To fully realise the potential of ECEC systems within these networks, a concerted effort toward integrated, locally responsive governance is imperative.

4.

HIGH QUALITY ECEC SYSTEMS ENCOMPASS STRATEGIES TO FOSTER PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To promote parental involvement in early childhood education, which has been shown to strongly predict positive outcomes for children, ECEC systems should:

- prioritise the inclusion of parental engagement in national ECEC quality guidelines, mandating services to foster continuous, inclusive family involvement throughout early childhood stages;
- encourage the local implementation of inclusive parental engagement programmes, such as culturally sensitive outreach initiatives adaptable to diverse family contexts;
- support the development of local parental guidance initiatives targeting low-income households and families in vulnerable conditions, addressing economic, linguistic, and time constraints to ensure engagement outcomes across the socio-economic spectrum.

Promoting children and parental involvement in early childhood education is essential for enhancing children's developmental outcomes and socio-emotional growth. Research consistently shows that their active engagement, whether through centre-based or home-based activities, significantly strengthens children's performance and social-emotional skills. This involvement is especially impactful when integrated into social-emotional interventions, which have been shown to enhance children's social-emotional competence and reduce challenging behaviours in preschool settings. Home-based parental involvement, where parents engage in educational activities at home, is a particularly strong predictor

of positive outcomes, including better attention, motivation, and reduced conduct problems.²⁶

This involvement is particularly vital across all populations, including immigrant and low-income families, where it serves as a key predictor of positive developmental outcomes, such as language proficiency, social competence, and adaptive behaviors. However, initiatives that aim to foster parental engagement must recognise that families vary widely in their cultural backgrounds, social structures, and resources. Thus, it is essential that outreach efforts are crafted in ways that respect these differences and promote democratic engagement, avoiding



normative expectations that may not fit all family contexts.²⁷

Studies focusing on low-income, urban families reveal that increased parental engagement in prekindergarten programmes leads to better mastery of early literacy and numeracy skills and overall developmental gains. Therefore, fostering parental involvement seems strategic for improving educational and socio-emotional outcomes, particularly in groups with traditionally lower access rates to ECEC. This highlights the need for educators and policymakers to create inclusive and supportive environments that encourage active parental participation in ways that are flexible and culturally sensitive.²⁸

The significance of specific outreach interventions by ECEC institutions is underscored by the fact that involvement from parents is observed to occur more frequently and consistently among affluent families. This disparity in parental engagement further contributes to discrepancies in academic outcomes among children from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Affluent parents possess a higher availability of resources, access to knowledge, and wider networks, thus facilitating their active involvement in their children's education.²⁹

On the other hand, families residing in lower socioeconomic conditions, including single-parent and immigrant households, often encounter considerable barriers to parental engagement due to limited time, financial constraints, and lower levels of educational attainment. These disparities serve to highlight the necessity of targeted initiatives that effectively encourage and support parental involvement among underserved communities. Such initiatives must avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and should strive to be

equitable, mindful of cultural, linguistic, and economic variations, so as to foster an inclusive engagement that respects the unique contributions and capacities of all families.

Effective leadership is crucial in ECEC settings to promote a consistent approach to family engagement throughout all stages of a child's development. This includes the pivotal first cycle (0-3), where adequate care is crucial, but extends also beyond that. ECEC leaders have a vital role in nurturing a professional culture that values and encourages active parental involvement as children transition from crèche to preschool and beyond. This continuity in pedagogical approaches is especially important for children with disabilities, who benefit greatly from stable and consistent support in both home and ECEC environments.³⁰

It is essential for national educational guidelines to formally acknowledge and prioritise the significance of fostering parental engagement. By incorporating these values into policies, educators and leaders are better equipped to maintain a cohesive and inclusive approach to family involvement, ensuring that the positive impact of early parental engagement extends throughout a child's educational journey.

5.

HIGH-QUALITY ECEC SETTINGS FOSTER A CULTURE OF CHILD PARTICIPATION, BOTH AT THE CENTRES AND AT HOME

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To foster a culture of child participation, both at ECEC centres and at home, local ECEC authorities should:


- encourage ECEC leaders to include child participation in decision-making, supporting children in rule-setting and activity choices to boost autonomy and self-confidence;
- improve partnerships between ECEC centres and families designed to help parents foster participatory practices at home, enhancing children's confidence and learning continuity.

A fifth key constitutive dimension of high-quality ECEC is the emphasis on fostering a culture of child participation, both within ECEC settings and at home. While parental involvement is widely recognised as crucial for enhancing children's developmental and socio-emotional outcomes, equally important is the active participation of children in their own learning and daily experiences.³¹ Child participation is fundamental to their well-being and learning, as it fosters deep engagement, concentration, and autonomy. When children are actively involved in activities, whether independently or with peers and educators, they experience intrinsic motivation, freedom, and fascination—key elements that lead to “deep level learning” where their cognitive and emotional capacities are fully engaged.³²

Involvement in decision-making processes within ECEC settings, such as contributing to rule-setting or selecting

projects, strengthens children's sense of self-efficacy and helps them learn the value of collaboration and compromise. This aligns with the principles of democratic participation, where children's voices are heard and respected. When young children engage early in participatory representation, they begin to understand the roles they play as active citizens in a democratic society. International frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, affirm children's right to express their views and influence decisions relevant to their lives.³³ However, for child participation to be fully effective, it must extend beyond formal institutions and into the home.

High-quality ECEC settings are those that not only create participatory environments within the centre but also succeed in fostering a culture of participatory education at home. Through strong educational alliances



with families, ECEC professionals can influence the home learning environment, encouraging parents to adopt participatory practices that mirror those in the ECEC setting. This partnership is key to reinforcing children's autonomy and involvement across both settings. Such relationships enable parents to develop strategies that support their children's active participation at home, thereby enhancing learning outcomes and fostering a consistent culture of participation.³⁴

The home learning environment plays a critical role in supporting children's development. When parents adopt participatory practices—such as allowing children to make choices, voice their opinions, and engage in decision-making processes—children experience continuity between their experiences at home and in ECEC settings. This consistency strengthens their confidence, self-expression, and ability to engage meaningfully in both settings.³⁵ ECEC professionals, therefore, have a pivotal role in guiding parents to create home environments that promote children's agency and active participation.

6.

HIGH-QUALITY ECEC SYSTEMS ARE WELL STAFFED BY A PROFESSIONAL WORKFORCE


RECOMMENDATIONS:

To improve the competence and stability of the workforce employed in ECEC settings, national and local authorities must:

- address endemic staff shortages in the sector and invest heavily in workforce development, expanding continuous professional development programs;
- promote the establishment of clear leadership structures and implement organized leadership training programs in ECEC settings;
- prioritise professional development programmes aimed at enhancing the ECEC workforce's ability and confidence to reach out to, engage with, and cooperate with families.
- establish national mandatory thresholds for child-to-staff ratios in ECEC settings to ensure educators can provide personalised attention and support.

A sixth key dimension of high-quality ECEC systems concerns the quality of the workforce and appropriate staffing levels. The success of ECEC programmes depends on the competence, stability, and adequacy of their workforce. Qualified professionals are essential for delivering the high-quality education and care that young children need for their development.³⁶ However, many European countries face significant challenges in this area, particularly regarding staff shortages. These shortages present a complex challenge due to the diversity of professional roles, qualifications, and employment structures in the sector, both within individual countries and across Europe.³⁷

The quality of the ECEC workforce is critical because it directly impacts children's developmental outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that continuous professional development significantly enhances practitioners' pedagogical awareness, knowledge, and methodological skills - elements crucial for fostering children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Well-trained staff are better equipped to implement developmentally appropriate practices, engage children in meaningful learning experiences, and support their overall well-being. Moreover, high-quality interactions between educators and children, a key determinant of positive outcomes, are more likely when educators are knowledgeable,



motivated, and supported through ongoing professional development.³⁸ Appropriate staffing levels are equally essential for maintaining the quality of ECEC services. Low child-to-staff ratios allow educators to provide individualised attention and support, which is essential for meeting each child's unique needs. However, staff shortages can lead to overburdened educators, diminishing the quality of care and contributing to high turnover rates. This instability disrupts the continuity of care, which is crucial for young children's sense of security and for establishing strong, supportive relationships with educators. Continuity is especially critical for children with disabilities, who rely on consistent and familiar pedagogical approaches to thrive. Families of these children often face heightened challenges when navigating discontinuities in care, making the need for stable and well-staffed ECEC environments even more pressing.³⁹

Furthermore, the quality of the workforce extends beyond individual competence to include effective leadership within ECEC settings. Studies have highlighted the importance of pedagogical leadership, yet many ECEC leaders lack clear and consistent leadership training, hindering the development of the profession. Effective leadership structures and organised leadership training are needed to promote shared leadership practices that can drive continuous improvement in ECEC services.⁴⁰ This is particularly important for managing the complex inter-organisational networks that are increasingly necessary to address the needs of children living in vulnerable situations. Only well-trained staff can effectively collaborate across sectors, ensuring that gaps in welfare service provision are addressed.

The attitude and training of the ECEC staff also plays a pivotal role in promoting parental engagement. Educators who are well-trained in communication and collaboration skills are more effective in building strong, trust-based relationships with families. Building trusting relationships with families can be challenging, especially for parents who have had negative past experiences with health or education services, such as those engaged with child protection, asylum seekers and refugees, or parents with disabilities. In this context, continuous professional development programmes focused on building collaborative relationships and managing challenging conversations can make a meaningful difference in day-to-day practice.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The quality of ECEC systems is closely tied to the active involvement of families. This paper emphasises the multidimensional nature of quality in ECEC and advocates for a comprehensive approach that integrates both structural factors, such as accessibility and affordability, and processual elements, such as the quality of interactions between educators, children, and their parents.

Essential to this approach is the recognition that parents are not simply consumers of ECEC services, but rather vital partners in their children's educational and care journeys. Therefore, ensuring high-quality ECEC requires systems that are not only inclusive and accessible to all families, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, but also deeply ingrained in the community and serving as hubs for multi-sectoral support.

Moreover, for children to thrive and reach their full potential, especially those in vulnerable circumstances, it is essential that they receive continuous, seamless care and education from early childhood through primary education. Research has consistently shown that smooth transitions between different stages of education, coupled with active family involvement, greatly enhance children's socio-emotional well-being and academic achievements. Given the pivotal role of ECEC settings in providing vital support to families, it is imperative to establish strong cross-sector collaborations to effectively address the diverse needs of families.

However, achieving these ambitious goals requires a well-supported and highly trained workforce. It is

essential to invest in professional development, leadership training, and adequate staffing levels to sustain the high-quality services offered by ECEC. Educators play a crucial role beyond the classroom; they are instrumental in fostering family engagement and empowering parents to actively participate in their children's education. Therefore, national policies must prioritise the development of the ECEC workforce to address current challenges, such as staff shortages and leadership gaps, and create a more equitable and effective ECEC system.

Supporting these changes are two key European-level strategic frameworks: the 2022 European Care Strategy and the 2021 European Child Guarantee. The Care Strategy emphasises the need for comprehensive care systems that integrate ECEC with broader social support networks. Similarly, the Child Guarantee aims to ensure that every child has access to quality services, including ECEC, regardless of their socio-economic background. By leveraging these frameworks through peer reviews, research seminars, and their integration into national policies through strong implementation plans, meaningful progress in ECEC can be achieved. Aligning with these strategic initiatives, policymakers can reinforce the importance of family involvement, support the development of a high-quality workforce, and ensure that all children benefit from equitable and high-standard early childhood education and care.

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**For more information
please contact:**

Martino Serapioni

Senior Programme Coordinator
mserapioni@coface-eu.org



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COFACE Families Europe


Rue du Marché aux Herbes 105/b48,
1000 Brussels


Tel: +32 2 500 56 90


Email: secretariat@coface-eu.org


Website: coface-eu.org

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