



# CHILDCARE GAP IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

A 2025 OVERVIEW



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FACTSHEET OF THE  
EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY  
ON FAMILY POLICY

**Author: Martino Serapioni**  
COFACE Research Programme Coordinator

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## General Overview

This factsheet addresses the ‘childcare gap’, the period, occurring after the end of well-compensated statutory parental leave<sup>1</sup> from employment after the birth of a child, during which families have not yet accrued the entitlement to a state-supported, full-time place in early childhood education and care (ECEC) for their children. Unable to access well-compensated leave or to place their child into full-time day-care, during the period identified as the childcare gap, families are left to rely on their own caregiving capabilities and financial resources. This may require parents to delay their return to work to personally care for their children, despite inadequate financial compensation, or even to leave employment altogether. Alternatively, families might be compelled to seek childcare solutions in the private market, enrolling their children in home-based or centre-based settings without state support, which can impose a significant financial burden on the family. In contrast to other publications, this factsheet embraces a ‘broad’ definition of childcare gap that includes situations of part-time entitlements - where children are eligible to state-supported ECEC but only for a limited number of hours per week. This broader perspective is important as part-time entitlements, while valuable, may ultimately fall short of providing parents with full autonomy in their decisions regarding returning to work.

From a family perspective, the concept of childcare gap takes on added significance, highlighting the complementarity that exists between parental leave and early childhood services frameworks. Although profoundly different in nature – care related employment leave schemes allow parents to temporarily leave work to care for young children, whereas childcare services operate in a mirror-image sense, offering families a caregiving alternative to taking time off work - both measures aim to support families balancing work and care obligations during a delicate life phase when these two dimensions become intertwined, often for the first time. Although generally supervised and delivered by different agencies and departments, when leave and ECEC policy designs are aligned and the two frameworks operate synergically, it results in a smooth transition between family care and early childhood services, supporting families with the organisational pressures of the period following the birth of a child. From this perspective, the childcare gap underscores a fragmentation between otherwise consecutive, complementary entitlements: the right of parents to well compensated parental leave and the right of children (or their parents) to access state supported

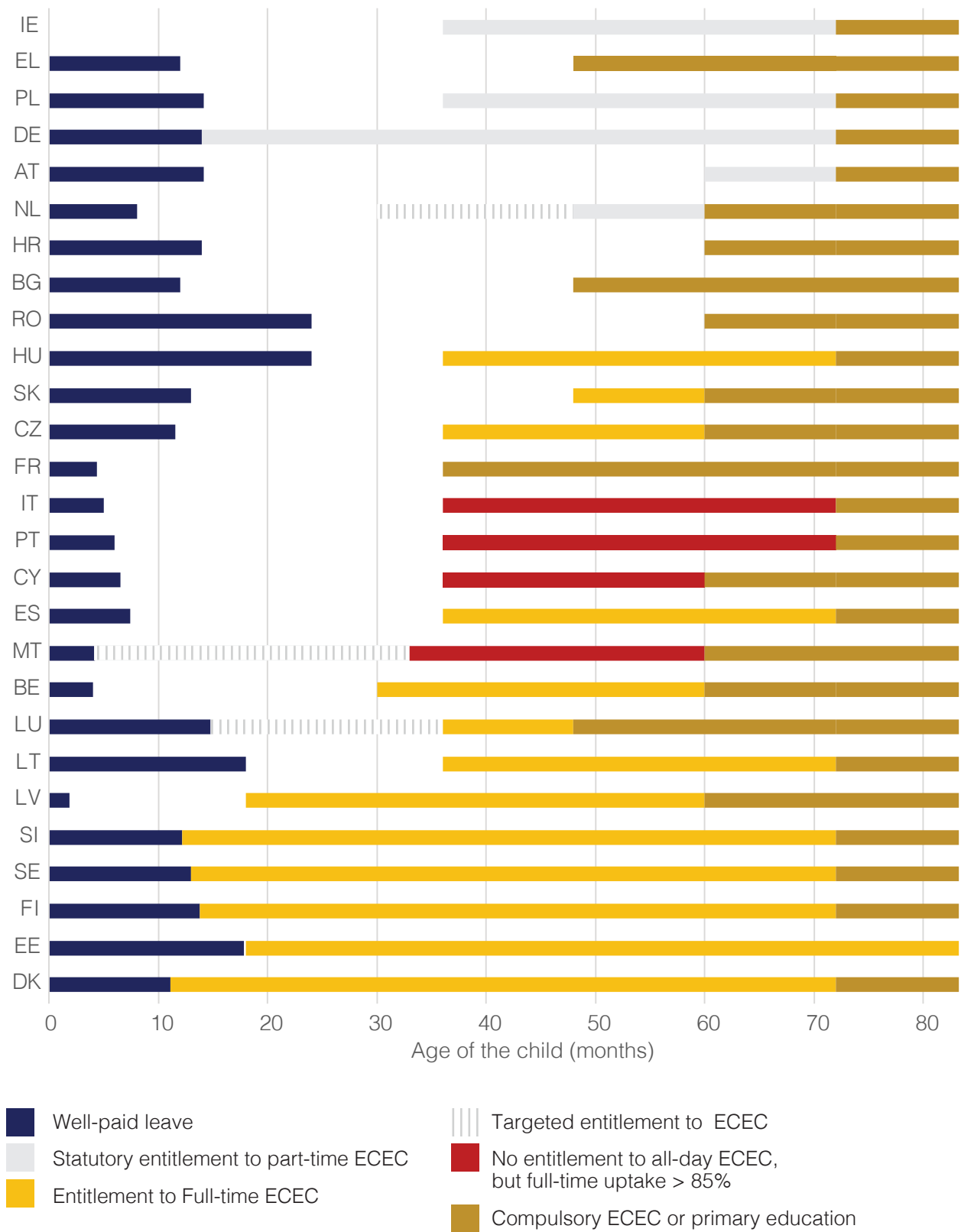
ECEC. This point is critically important. Framing access to ECEC as a basic entitlement guarantees that families have the right to enroll their children in daycare when needed, without delay. Moreover, it compels the public system to make a universal effort to ensure access for all families by making ECEC services widely available and supporting the costs for families who cannot afford the enrolment fees.

In addition to parental leave and ECEC services, other components have a significant role in relieving work-life balance tensions during this phase. These include financial support schemes (child/family benefits), which can significantly mediate parents’ choice to stay at home with their children or, conversely, seek a quick return to work, sometimes at the cost of sub-optimal caregiving choices. Access to an integrated network of family support services can also play a key role in empowering families during the perinatal phase, improving access to preventive healthcare, parenting support and educational assistance. To assess the true extent to which families are either left unsupported or, conversely, aided in navigating the delicate transition to life with young children, the availability of these resources should also be considered. Even with these considerations, however, the childcare gap remains an important lens through which to assess the interplay between two fundamental components of family work-life balance after the birth of a child. The childcare gap offers a clear snapshot of how well these complementary policy frameworks aligned and function together to support families, providing a public policy alternative to reliance on private resources.

Figure 1 illustrates the current state of the childcare gap in the European Union, as of 2023/2024. The chart allows for the identification of cross-country characteristics and their grouping into homologous categories.

A clear dividing line distinguishes countries without a childcare gap from those with one. The former group—comprising **Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Slovenia, and Sweden**—demonstrates a seamless transition from well-compensated parental leave (in dark blue) to full-time entitlements for ECEC services (in light yellow).<sup>2</sup> These five countries are the only ones in the European Union where a childcare gap does not exist. While a more detailed analysis of these countries would reveal variations in the duration of parental leave and the scope of ECEC service coverage, significant similarities stand out. A key distinguishing feature of these “no-gap” countries—apart from others in the EU (except Latvia)—is the early implementation of ECEC entitlements, typically beginning well before a child reaches 20 months of age. In **Estonia, Denmark, and Slovenia**, the ECEC pathway remains optional until elementary education

Figure 1: The Childcare Gap in the European Union in 2024



Source: Own elaboration based on SEEPRO-3 study 2024 and 20th International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2024

begins, usually between the ages of six and seven, whereas **Finland** and **Sweden** include one year of compulsory preschool preparation. All five countries also share an integrated ECEC system, spanning nursery to primary education, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. These systems generally operate on income-based fee structures until primary education, with targeted provisions for free access. **Sweden** uniquely offers 15 hours per week of free childcare for all children aged 36 months and above. While the duration of well-compensated parental leave is relatively long in these countries, with all offering over 10 months, this alone is not the defining characteristic that sets them apart.

The second group is much larger, encompassing the remaining 22 member countries of the European Union—countries where a “real” childcare gap exists. This gap refers to the mismatch between the end of well-compensated parental leave and the beginning of an entitlement to enroll children in full-time ECEC services. As shown in Figure 1, this group is highly heterogeneous, with significant variations in both the length of the “uncovered” period (i.e., the childcare gap) and the nature of the entitlement to ECEC, including when—and if—it is provided within the system. This factsheet distinguishes this broad macro-group of European countries “with childcare gaps” into two distinct subsets.

The first subset includes 13 countries: **Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, Latvia, and Lithuania**. These countries share a key characteristic: an individual right (or obligation) to full-time access to ECEC, similar to the “no-gap” countries. However, this entitlement is triggered “late”, meaning it is not aligned with the conclusion of well-compensated parental leave and is therefore insufficient to close the childcare gap. With the exception of **Latvia**, entitlement to full-time ECEC in these countries begins between the ages of 2.5 and 3. In split ECEC systems—those divided into two cycles: “childcare provision” for the 0–2 age group and “early learning” provision for the 3–6 age group—this entitlement typically coincides with the transition from nursery to kindergarten settings. In **Portugal**, entitlement is at a minimum of 25 hours per week, rather than a generic “full-time,” but achieves similarly high participation rates (above 85%). The case of **Cyprus** is similar. In **France**, children technically do not have a right to ECEC but rather a duty to receive “instruction” starting at age 3. Conceptual distinctions aside, the outcome is comparable: public institutions are obligated to provide sufficient places for all children in this age group, resulting in very high levels of full-time attendance (above 70%). **Italy** and **Malta** present a unique case. In neither country is there a de

jure entitlement to ECEC; however, such entitlement exists de facto due to the historical development of preschool services for the 3–6 age group, which has been extensive and widespread enough to universally guarantee access. This is reflected in exceptionally high levels of full-time attendance (above 85%). In **Slovakia**, legal entitlement to ECEC is a recent innovation. Introduced in 2023, it is being phased in progressively, extending to younger children each year. By the 2025/26 school year, it will encompass all children from the age of 3. The length of parental leave is not a defining feature of the countries in this subset, although it is within this group that all European countries with the shortest durations of well-compensated leave are found. The presence of a childcare gap in these countries arises primarily from the late onset of entitlement to ECEC. **Latvia**, however, is an exception to this rule, as it is the exceptionally short duration of parental leave that creates the mismatch between the two frameworks.

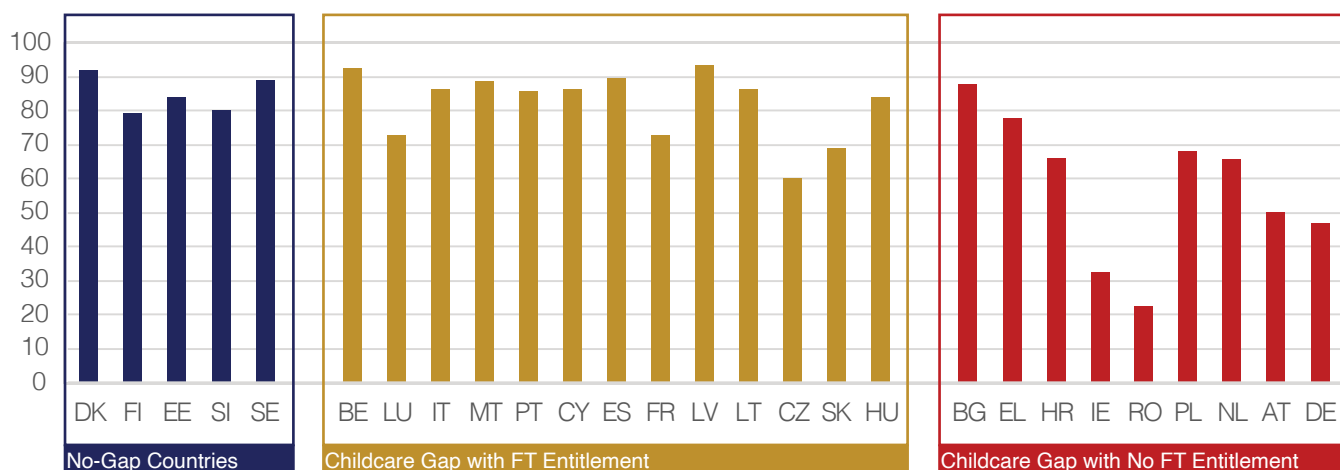
The second subset includes nine countries: **Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Greece, and Poland**. This group is even more heterogeneous than the first subset. The only common characteristic is the absence of a national entitlement to full-time ECEC, either de facto or de jure. Like the first subset, the majority of these countries also operate split ECEC systems (with the notable exceptions of **Germany, Austria, and Croatia**), where part-time entitlements or compulsory attendance typically begin during the second cycle. In **Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, and Romania**, as in France, an obligation to attend ECEC services replaces a voluntary entitlement, but this obligation is triggered later, between the ages of 4 and 5. In **Greece**, the obligation amounts to 25 hours per week, while in **Croatia** it is 250 hours per year. In **Romania**, municipalities and school inspectorates are formally tasked with ensuring sufficient ECEC places for all children, but no regulatory framework exists to enforce this. **Poland** presents a somewhat different case, resembling **Portugal** in providing a legal entitlement to 25 hours per week starting from a child’s third birthday. However, enforcement is inconsistent, rendering the entitlement effectively unenforceable for children under age 4. Full-time attendance in the 3–6 age group remains below 70%. Ireland represents a distinct liberal welfare model. Parental leave is paid at a flat rate, and entitlement to a minimal number of ECEC hours begins well after the child turns 3. **Austria** and **the Netherlands** are profoundly from each other, yet similar in that they offer entitlements only to part-time ECEC - however, unlike countries such as **Portugal** and **Cyprus**, these part-time entitlements have not translated into high levels of full-time attendance, which remain below 70%. **Germany**’s case is unique within this group

due to significant internal variation. While there is an individual entitlement to ECEC beginning at a child's first birthday, the entitlement does not specify the number of hours per day. Some Länder (states)

guarantee only limited hours, while others provide none at all. As a result, full-time attendance of kindergarten services for children over 3 remains below 50%, one of the lowest rates in Europe.

## Overview by country group, type of entitlement and fee structure

Figure 2: Full-time ECEC participation (25h per week or more), by country group (2023)



Source: own calculations based on: EU SILC

Another key dimension of the childcare gap, complementing the issue of full- or part-time hourly coverage of ECEC services, is the affordability of these services. This dimension relates to their financing structure, particularly the extent of family contributions required for their operation. From a work-life balance perspective, the cost of ECEC services significantly influences families' autonomy in deciding whether to provide direct care for their child or return to work.

Unlike the discourse on entitlements, however, the cost of ECEC services varies widely across Europe, largely due to the autonomy of local authorities in setting enrollment or participation fees. This territorial variance makes national-level generalizations about service costs challenging and prone to error. What is possible, however, is a broad overview of the overall funding structures in place, which can be generalized to some extent across countries. Using the same division into three macro-groups as before, the first group of "no-gap" countries—characterized by single-cycle integrated ECEC systems (0–6)—exhibits notable similarities in funding models. **Denmark's** entitlement to ECEC services begins at 6 months and is available on a full-time basis. The country operates a fee-paying model, which is income-based, meaning that the costs for parents are adjusted according to their financial situation. This structure ensures that families with lower incomes face a reduced financial

burden, while those with higher incomes pay more. Although ECEC is not free, **Denmark's** income-based system aims to ensure that it remains accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic background. There is no compulsory preschool until the age of 6, making ECEC services more flexible, but still central to a child's early development. **Slovenia** also offers an individual entitlement to full-time ECEC, beginning at 11 months. The country operates a fee-paying model for the entire unitary ECEC cycle, with costs varying based on income and other local criteria. Similar to Denmark, the system is designed to ensure that families can access services regardless of their financial situation, although further details on subsidies and exemptions are less clearly defined in public data. **Finland's** full-time ECEC entitlement begins at 9 or 10 months. The system is fee-paying and income-based, ensuring that the cost is proportionate to the family's financial status. Unlike Denmark and Slovenia, from age 6, Finland implements a compulsory preschool program, which is provided free of charge. **Sweden** offers an entitlement to full-time ECEC starting at 12 months. The service is fee-paying and income-based until age 3, when a universal provision of 15h/week free of charge begins. Like Finland, from age 6, preschool becomes compulsory and is free of charge. Estonia's individual entitlement to ECEC begins slightly later, at 18 months, and offers full-time care, which is free of charge, although occasional parental contributions may be required. **Estonia** stands

Table 1. No-Gap Countries

	ECEC Entitlement		Costs for parents	
	START	HOURS		
<b>Denmark</b>	6 months	full-time	fee paying, income-based	
<b>Slovenia</b>	11 months	full-time	fee paying, income-based	
<b>Finland</b>	9/10 months	full-time	voluntary cycle:	fee paying, income-based
	from Age 6: compulsory preschool class		preschool class:	free-of charge
<b>Sweden</b>	12 months	full-time	voluntary cycle:	fee paying, income-based; starting at Age 3: 15h/week free-of-charge
	from Age 6: compulsory preschool class		preschool class	free-of charge
<b>Estonia</b>	18 months	full-time	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions <sup>3</sup>	

Source: Own elaboration based on: SEEPRO-3 study 2024 and 20th International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2024

apart from the other countries in this comparison by providing free ECEC to all children, regardless of income, and without requiring payments for basic services. However, like many other countries, there may still be additional costs for extracurricular activities or special programs not covered under the basic curriculum. This emphasis on free access from an earlier age contrasts with the income-based models seen in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.

The other two groups, consisting of countries with split ECEC systems, share some common characteristics but also exhibit significant variations. Specifically, the “lower” ECEC cycle, which covers childcare services for children under the age of three, is generally fee-based. Public services, whether state or municipal, often charge income-based rates, while private providers, who are also prevalent, do not always apply such differential pricing. In contrast, the “higher” ECEC cycle, serving children aged three to the start of compulsory education, typically introduces free-of-charge models. These may apply either to the entire attendance period or to a limited number of hours. Wherever attendance is compulsory, the associated hours are provided free of charge, in alignment with the principle of the right to education.

Across Europe, the implementation of free-of-charge ECEC services exhibits considerable variation, particularly in terms of the relationship between voluntary and compulsory services, as well as the number of hours guaranteed to children. These variations are crucial for understanding the accessibility and affordability of ECEC and the broader work-life reconciliation policies in place across different countries.

In the first group of EU countries with a childcare gap, represented in Table 2, the childcare gap occurs even in the presence of a statutory entitlement to full-time ECEC, which, however, is not aligned with the end of the period of well-paid parental leave and thus is not in itself sufficient to ‘close’ the gap. In these countries, the cost structure of ECEC tends to be mixed. While early childhood education for children under three is generally fee-based, subsidies and income-based adjustments help make it more affordable. However, these measures often do not cover full-time care needs, leaving some families with significant out-of-pocket expenses. From age three or four, many of these countries provide free preschool education, but the number of guaranteed hours varies. In **Latvia**, ECEC services are provided free of charge starting at 18 months, with full-time care available. This entitlement becomes compulsory from age 5, at which point attendance is mandatory, marking a shift from voluntary to compulsory early education. **Lithuania** follows a similar framework, providing free ECEC for children aged 3 to 6. Specifically, children receive 20 hours of free care per week starting at age 3, with services becoming compulsory at age 6. Thus, the entitlement to free care is initially available at 36 months, but it becomes legally binding only when children reach the compulsory education age of 6, emphasizing a structured progression from free access to compulsory schooling. In **Portugal**, the ECEC system employs a mixed fee structure. For children aged 0-2, a combination of flat-rate and income-based fees applies. In the 3-6 age group, ECEC is free for 25 hours per week. After this threshold, the system becomes income-based. Although the entitlement to free services is substantial, financial barriers persist



Table 2. Countries with Childcare Gap and Full-time ECEC Entitlement (Statutory or De Facto)

	ECEC Entitlement		Costs for parents	
	START	HOURS		
<b>Latvia</b>	18 months	full-time	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions	
	(compulsory from age 5)			
<b>Lithuania</b>	36 months	full-time	3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
	from Age 6: compulsory preschool class (minimum attendance 20h/week)		preschool	free-of-charge for 20h/week
<b>Portugal</b>	36 months	25h/week	0-2 cycle:	mixed (flat rate + income-based)
			3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge for 25h/week, then income-based
<b>Spain</b>	36 months <sup>4</sup>	25h/week	0-2 cycle:	fee paying, income-based
			3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Cyprus</b>	36 months	not specified <sup>5</sup>	0-2 cycle:	fee-paying, income based
			3-6 cycle:	flat monthly fee
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class		preschool:	free-of-charge for 26h/week
<b>Belgium</b>	30 months	23-33h/week, depending on local authorities	0-2 cycle:	fee-paying, income based
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class (in Flanders: 250 half days)		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge curricular activities, with parental contributions for extra activities
<b>France</b>	no individual entitlement to ECEC		0-2 cycle:	fee paying, income-based
	from Age 3: compulsory 'instruction' <sup>6</sup>		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Luxembourg</b>	36 months	36 weeks/year (éducation précoce)	1-3 cycle:	free-of-charge for 20h/week, then income-based fees; private providers often operate with higher, independent fee structures
	from Age 4: compulsory preschool class (minimum attendance: 26h/week)		3-5 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Hungary</b>	no individual entitlement to ECEC		0-2 cycle:	fee paying structure with targeted free options; private providers often charge higher, non-regulated fees
	from Age 3: compulsory kindergarten (minimum attendance: 4h/day)		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Czech Republic</b>	36 months	not specified	0-2 cycle:	fee paying model with cost caps <sup>7</sup> ; private providers play a significant role and charge higher, non-regulated fees
			3-4 cycle:	fee paying but heavily subsidised
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class		preschool:	free-of-charge
<b>Slovak Republic</b>	48 months <sup>8</sup>	not specified	0-2 and 3-4 cycles	fee paying model with targeted childcare allowances; private providers play a significant role
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class		preschool:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Malta</b>	no universal entitlement to ECEC <sup>9</sup>		0-2 cycle	mixed model with targeted free options, income-based fees, and significant private sector involvement
			3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge with occasional parental contributions
<b>Italy</b>	no universal entitlement to ECEC		0-2 cycle	fee paying, income-based; private providers often operate with higher, independent fee structures
			3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions; significant private sector involvement with independent fee structures

Source: Own elaboration based on: SEEPRO-3 study 2024 and 20th International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2024

once the 25-hour limit is reached, suggesting that the model, while inclusive, still places a significant financial burden on some families. **Spain** similarly provides free ECEC services for children aged 3-6, but for the 0-2 age group, services are fee-paying, with fees based on household income. For the 3-6 age group, care is free but may involve occasional parental contributions. This distinction underscores the significant focus placed on the 3-6 age group, which is seen as the primary beneficiary of free ECEC policies, while younger children face greater costs. In **Cyprus**, free ECEC is provided from age 5, with children entitled to 26 hours per week of care. For the 0-2 age group, services are fee-paying, with income-based charges. The transition to free care at age 5 coincides with the beginning of compulsory education, reinforcing the link between free provision and compulsory schooling, with a clear demarcation between voluntary and compulsory stages of care. **Belgium** operates a decentralized system in which the number of free hours (between 23h and 33h per week) varies by community. Generally, children aged 3-6 are entitled to free curricular activities, but parental contributions are required for extracurricular activities. The variability of free services depending on the region complicates the provision of universally accessible free care, with municipalities assuming significant responsibility for determining the scope of free provision. In **France**, the system is distinct in that there is no individual entitlement to ECEC. Instead, a duty to receive 'instruction' becomes compulsory at age 3. This compulsory mechanism guarantees free access to services for the 3-6 age group although the system for younger children (0-2) remains fee-based. **Luxembourg** provides free care for up to 20 hours per week for children from 36 months. For children aged 4 and above, preschool becomes compulsory, with a minimum attendance requirement of 26 hours per week. In **Hungary**, ECEC services for children aged 0-2 operate on a fee-paying model with targeted free options in public institutions, while private providers may charge higher, non-regulated fees. From age 3, children are entitled to free care with a compulsory minimum attendance of 4 hours per day, though the quality and affordability of services can be influenced by the dominance of the private sector. The **Czech Republic** employs a mixed fee structure, with fee-paying services for the 0-2 age group, subject to cost caps, and heavily subsidized services for the 3-4 age group. Preschool for children aged 5 and above is compulsory and free of charge, but substantial private sector involvement, with providers charging higher, non-regulated fees, limits the extent to which free services are universally available. In the **Slovak Republic**, the system is predominantly fee-paying for the 0-2 and 3-4 age groups, with significant private sector involvement. From age 5, technically, preschool services are free of charge,

although parental contributions may still apply. The lack of clear specifications regarding the number of hours guaranteed in the free service model further complicates the understanding of entitlements in the country. **Malta** and **Italy** do not offer universal entitlement to ECEC. Both countries, however, provide a mixed model with targeted free options for children aged 3-6. In Italy, preschool education is free, but private providers play a significant role in the delivery of services, often charging higher, independent fees. Similarly, in Malta, while ECEC for the 0-2 age group is fee-paying, services become free from age 5, with a significant private sector presence shaping the delivery and cost of care.

In the second group of EU countries with a childcare gap, represented in Table 3, the childcare gap is accompanied by a lack of national statutory entitlement to full-time ECEC. In these countries, the problem of the gap is not related to, or at least not primarily to, a misalignment between policy frameworks, but to the non-existence—at the national level—of an individual entitlement to full-time childcare support. The cost structure is also mixed, although in many of these countries the financial burden on parents is significant, as they rely heavily on private sector provision or regional funding schemes, leading to substantial disparities in costs. In these cases, ECEC for children under three is typically fee-based, with only limited public support or targeted subsidies. As a result, affordability is often a challenge, particularly in areas where public services are scarce and private providers charge unregulated fees. Free preschool education is generally available from age three to six, but variations in the number of guaranteed hours and the presence of additional parental contributions make access inconsistent. In countries such as Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands, the decentralization of ECEC policies means that costs and accessibility can vary widely depending on the region, further complicating the financial situation for families. In **Croatia**, there is no universal entitlement to ECEC, and services for children under 5 are fee-based, with some targeted free options and cost caps. From the age of 5, preschool becomes compulsory, with a minimum attendance requirement of 250 hours per year. This compulsory provision marks a shift from a predominantly fee-paying system to a guarantee of access to education for older children. However, the reliance on private providers and targeted free options introduces inequality, as families may still face significant costs, particularly for younger children not yet covered by the compulsory scheme. Similarly, **Bulgaria** lacks universal access to ECEC, with the 0-2 age group subject to a fee-paying model and limited public subsidies. From age 4, preschool becomes compulsory, and the system offers free services for the 3-6 age group. While public provision for older

Table 3. Countries with Childcare Gap and no Statutory Entitlement to Full-Time ECEC

	ECEC Entitlement		Costs for parents	
	START	HOURS		
<b>Croatia</b>	no universal entitlement to ECEC		fee paying model with targeted free options and cost caps	
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class			
<b>Bulgaria</b>	no universal entitlement to ECEC		0-2 cycle:	fee paying model with limited availability of public subsidies
	from Age 4: compulsory preschool		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge; private providers operate with a higher fee structure
<b>Romania</b>	no universal entitlement to ECEC <sup>10</sup>		0-2 cycle:	fee paying model with targeted free options and subsidies; significant private sector involvement
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge with occasional parental contributions; private providers operate with a higher fee scale
<b>Greece</b>	no individual entitlement to ECEC		0-3 cycle:	fee paying income-based model
	from Age 4: compulsory preschool		3-6 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Ireland</b>	between 32-42 months	not specified	0-2 cycle:	fee-paying, with limited public support <sup>11</sup>
			3-5 cycle:	free-of-charge for 3h/day, then fee paying
<b>Poland</b>	36 months	25h/week	0-2 cycle:	fee-paying with targeted free options and limited public support, depending on local authorities
	from Age 6: compulsory attendance		3-5 cycle:	free-of-charge for 5h/day, then parental contributions, typically income based; significant private sector involvement operating higher fee scales
<b>Netherlands</b>	48 months <sup>12</sup>	not specified	0-3 cycle:	fee paying with targeted income-based childcare allowances
	from age 5: compulsory preschool		4-6 cycle:	free-of-charge with occasional parental contributions;
<b>Austria</b>	no individual entitlement to ECEC		0-4 cycle:	Significant regional variation, but costs are partly income related
	from Age 5: compulsory preschool class		3-5 cycle:	free-of-charge, with occasional parental contributions
<b>Germany</b>	12 months	not specified (great regional variation)	fee paying model with significant regional variation <sup>13</sup>	fee paying structure with targeted free options; private providers often charge higher, non-regulated fees <sup>14</sup>

Source: Own elaboration based on: SEEPRO-3 study 2024 and 20th International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2024

children is free, private providers often charge higher fees. This mirrors the situation in Croatia, where public services are free for older children but private providers introduce disparities based on cost. In both countries, compulsory preschool for the 3-6 age group ensures basic access to education, though the financial burden on families with younger children remains significant. **Romania** adopts a similar approach, where the 0-2 age group is subject to a fee-paying model, with targeted free options and subsidies available. From age 5, preschool becomes compulsory, and the 3-6 age group is entitled to free services. However, parental contributions may still be required for additional activities or services not covered by the basic curriculum. The role of private providers is also prominent, and they typically charge higher fees. Like Bulgaria, Romania combines free access for older children with a mixed system of private provision for younger children, which may present affordability challenges for families who rely on private providers. **Greece** also has no universal entitlement to ECEC, but a fee-paying, income-based model is applied for the 0-3 age group. Preschool education becomes compulsory from age 4, with a minimum attendance of 25 hours per week. The 3-6 age group receives free preschool education, although there are occasional parental contributions for additional activities. Private providers in Greece tend to charge higher fees, reflecting the broader trend in “childcare gap” European countries of free public education being supplemented by private sector involvement. As with the previous examples, the free provision for older children offers a more accessible route to education, but the financial burden on families with younger children remains a concern. **Ireland's** system diverges slightly in that ECEC entitlement starts between 32 and 42 months, with the 0-2 age group fee-paying and receiving very limited public support. For the 3-5 age group, preschool is free for 3 hours per day, after which additional hours require parental contributions. Ireland's system reflects a liberal welfare tradition, making it quite distinctive in the European Union today. **Poland** offers a similar structure to that of Portugal, with ECEC entitlement starting at 36 months, where the 0-2 age group is subject to fee payments, though some local authorities offer targeted free options. Preschool becomes compulsory from age 6, and for the 3-5 age group, services are free for 5 hours per day, with parental contributions required for additional hours. The role of private providers is very significant, particularly in areas where public provision is limited.

In **the Netherlands**, ECEC entitlement begins at 48 months, with the 0-3 age group following a fee-paying model that is complemented by income-based childcare allowances. From age 5, preschool

becomes compulsory, and the 4-6 age group receives free services with occasional parental contributions. The Netherlands, like many other European countries, ensures free education for older children while maintaining a fee-based system for younger children, with targeted allowances to support lower-income families. **Austria** offers ECEC entitlement for children from 0-4 years old, with significant regional variations in the cost structure. Preschool education becomes compulsory from age 5, with a minimum attendance requirement of 20 hours per week. Costs for ECEC services are partly income-related, with some regions providing free services for up to 20 hours per week, while additional hours may require parental contributions. The regional disparities in Austria's system reflect the decentralized nature of ECEC provision in many countries, where access to services and associated costs can vary significantly depending on location. Likewise, **Germany's** ECEC system varies widely across regions, with entitlement beginning at 12 months. Services are fee-based, with significant regional variation in both the number of guaranteed hours and the level of parental contributions. In some Länder, public services are more subsidized, while in others, families face higher costs. The regional variation in Germany reflects the broader challenges many countries face in implementing a uniform ECEC system, as local authorities often have considerable influence over funding and service delivery. In Estonia, there is technically no individual entitlement to childcare but rather a municipal obligation to provide the service.

## Endnotes

1. Well-compensated, or well-paid leave, refers to income-based payment equivalent to at least 66 percent of prior earnings (calculated using the legal replacement rate). This encompasses postnatal maternity, paternity, and parental leave.
2. In Estonia, there is technically no individual entitlement to childcare but rather a municipal obligation to provide the service.
3. In Estonia, ECEC is free apart from meal costs, with capped parental contributions set by national guidelines, varying by child's age and preschool type.
4. In Spain, Some Autonomous Communities are also extending this entitlement to 1 and 2 year-olds.
5. In Cyprus, opening hours of state-run preschool facilities are usually 8h-13h.
6. In France, "instruction" is compulsory rather than attendance, allowing children aged 3 and older to be home-schooled with permission, though few opt for this option.
7. In the Czech Republic, since 2022, new funding rules have capped parental contributions for children under 3, ensuring fees charged by ECEC settings remain below the state subsidy per childcare place.
8. In Slovakia, legal entitlement to ECEC for children under five was introduced in 2023 through the Education Act. Starting in 2024/2025, all four-year-olds will be eligible, extending to three-year-olds by 2025/2026, addressing parental demands for universal access to quality, affordable pre-primary education.
9. In Malta, ECEC is not universally guaranteed, but a targeted entitlement provides full-time access from 3 months, conditional on one parent being in full-time work or education and limited to specific state-run settings.
10. In Romania, the 2011 Education Act requires municipalities and school inspectorates to ensure adequate ECEC places, but lacks a national policy to enforce this.
11. In Ireland, there is no tradition of public support for the under-3 early years sector, with parents typically covering childcare costs. However, since 2017, the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) has helped reduce costs, aiming to improve accessibility and alleviate poverty.
12. In the Netherlands, municipalities must also offer at least 960 hours (about 16 hours/week) of childcare for children aged 2½ to 4, prioritizing those from disadvantaged families. Attendance is voluntary, and municipalities control the allocation of state funds, typically targeting children with language delays.
13. Since August 2013, Germany has had a federally defined legal entitlement to ECEC, with regulations varying across individual Länder for a place in either centre-based or home-based settings from a child's first birthday until they start school. Initially, when the entitlement was granted in 1996 for children aged 3 and older, the "place" was not specified in terms of hours or days. Currently, ten of the 16 Länder guarantee between four and ten hours per day, with higher levels typically found in eastern Länder. Five western Länder and one eastern state have no hourly specifications. In Berlin, additional hours are guaranteed for children in homeless shelters, while Hamburg extends the total hours.
14. Parental contributions for childcare in Germany vary significantly by provider, municipality, and federal state. The Gute-KiTa-Gesetz mandates income-based adjustments and expanded fee exemptions, with municipalities required to offer guidance on applying for exemptions. However, fees can differ by several hundred euros per month, even for similar services in comparable areas. In 2020, monthly contributions for full-day care for children under 3 ranged from €0 in some states (e.g., Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) to €360 in North Rhine-Westphalia. The 2022 amendment to the Child and Youth Welfare Act increased fee exemptions, but only three federal states (Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Berlin) offer full exemption, while others provide partial exemptions or subsidies based on criteria like age or attendance length. In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 1% of their net household income on childcare costs. Regarding guaranteed childcare hours, ten federal states specify between four to ten hours a day, typically in eastern regions, while others, including Berlin and Hamburg, have additional provisions for specific circumstances.

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# FACTSHEET OF THE EUROPEAN OBSERVATORY ON FAMILY POLICY



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