

Breaking silos, building futures. Policy innovations for integrated family and child support

25-26 September 2025
Brussels, Belgium

Conference objectives and core themes

Jointly organised by COFACE Families Europe and the Odisee Centre for Family Studies, this interdisciplinary conference brings together researchers, policymakers, civil servants, and civil society representatives to examine integrated, place-based approaches to enhancing family resilience and social equity through cross-sectoral service coordination. Focusing on governance mechanisms and intervention strategies for perinatal families and young children, the event will critically analyse how intersectoral collaboration improves service efficacy and generates sustainable societal benefits.

Strategically timed to coincide with key 2025 EU policy developments - including the revision of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the introduction of the Union of Skills, and the formulation of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy - the conference addresses pressing needs for policy innovation amid multiple intersecting crises. Through comparative analysis of transformative governance and digital innovation models, it seeks to identify replicable frameworks for inclusive, multi-level and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Programme overview

The conference begins with a keynote panel that will establish the framework for the day's discussion, examining family support systems through three critical lenses: poverty prevention, early childhood development, and gender parity. This approach reveals how strategic investments in early childhood interventions and supporting families during the perinatal period simultaneously advance multiple policy objectives.

The complexity of these goals, however, calls for systemic coordination, requiring both vertical integration across governance levels and horizontal alignment among service providers. Such cross-sectoral synergy, in turn, demands a renewed institutional flexibility, a rediscovered capacity for services to transcend traditional operational boundaries - coupled with robust municipal mechanisms for networked governance and interagency cooperation.

Following the keynote, four thematic breakout sessions ('streams') will allow participants to delve deeper into innovative approaches - from evolving ECEC centres and integrated family hubs to prevention networks and digital governance - that address fragmentation in family support systems.

STREAM 1 EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF ECEC

This stream examines the expanding mandate of ECEC services as they evolve into holistic support centres for families. This dual role involves integrating family services and parenting support while strengthening their educational function within the broader system. The morning session will focus on the leadership and quality frameworks required for this transition, using North Rhine-Westphalia's certification model as a key case study. The afternoon will explore practical models for coordination and integration, positioning ECEC centres as anchors for multidisciplinary community networks.

STREAM 2 INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT MODELS

This stream focuses on the European phenomenon of multifunctional, integrated family support hubs that co-locate services for families. The morning session offers a deep dive into the decade-old Flemish "Huis van het Kind" model, examining its challenges and evolution from a municipal perspective. The afternoon session features a comparative analysis of other European models, with a focus on the key levers for their success: funding mechanisms, investment incentives, and cross-sectoral governance.

STREAM 3 PREVENTION THROUGH CROSS-SECTORAL
COLLABORATION

This stream focuses on the construction of interdisciplinary networks at the local level to support families with young children, anchored in the principles of nurturing care and prevention. The morning session will explore Germany's community-based prevention networks. The afternoon will analyse Italian strategies for preventing institutionalization through nurturing care frameworks. Discussions will centre on the barriers to building these networks and the preconditions for their success, including funding, governance, and multi-provider partnerships.

STREAM 4 INNOVATIONS FOR EQUITABLE FAMILY SUPPORT

This stream explores high-level innovation in governance and digitalization for equitable family support. It presents two national case studies: Finland's SOTE reform, which created a new county-level governance structure elevating family centres, and Estonia's digital integration and ministerial-level Prevention Council, which automates service delivery. The session will analyse the political conditions for such transformative reforms and debate the key barriers and preconditions for their success, including financial and management incentives.

Thursday, September 25

8H30-9H15	Registration and coffee	
9H15-9H30	Opening remarks	
	Annemie DRIESKENS Kathleen EMMERY	European Observatory on Family Policy Odisee University
9H30-10H30	Keynote panel	
	Wim VAN LANCKER Christian MORABITO Mara YERKES Olivier THÉVENON	KU Leuven Save the Children Utrecht University OECD
10H30-11H00	Q&A	
11H00-11H30	Coffee break	
11H30-13H00	Parallel sessions	
	STREAM 1	EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF ECEC
		Geraldine LIBREAU Hester HULPIA Sandra FISCHER European Commission Artevelde University of Applied Sciences University of Bonn
	STREAM 2	INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT MODELS
		Tine ROMMENS Ivan PAUWELS Opgroeien Agency Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities
	STREAM 3	PREVENTION THROUGH CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION
		Ivelina BORISOVA Jörg FISCHER Christina WIEDA UNICEF Erfurt University Bertelsmann Foundation
	STREAM 4	INNOVATIONS FOR EQUITABLE FAMILY SUPPORT
		Rense NIEUWENHUIS Maria Kaisa AULA Marina WETZER-KARLSSON Stockholm University Welfare area of Central Finland Väestöliitto - the Family Federation of Finland
13H00-14H00	Lunch break	
14H00-15H30	Parallel sessions	
	STREAM 1	EXPANDING THE BOUNDARIES OF ECEC
		Elizabeth SHUEY Mihaela IONESCU Anne LAMBRECHTS OECD International Step by Step Association Elmer
	STREAM 2	INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT MODELS
		Luciano MALFER Maarja OVIIR-NEIVELT Maria PETKOVA FBK Foundation Lapseheaolu Tulip Foundation
	STREAM 3	PREVENTION THROUGH CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION
		Debora SANGUINATO Giorgio TAMBURLINI Paola MILANI Save the Children Centro per la Salute delle Bambine e dei Bambini University of Padua
	STREAM 4	INNOVATIONS FOR EQUITABLE FAMILY SUPPORT
		Hanna VSEVIOV Claudia PERONI Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs Eurofound
15H30-16H30	Closing remarks and networking drinks	
	Antonia TORRENS	COFACE Families Europe
19H00-21H00	Dinner at La Chaloupe d'Or restaurant	

Friday, September 26

9H30-10H30	Site visit House of the child "Elmer Noord"	
10H45-11H45	Site visit House of the child "Elmer Noord"	

Practical information

WORKING LANGUAGE: The working language of the conference is English.

TARGET AUDIENCE: The event is designed for European and Belgian researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

CONFERENCE VENUE: **Odisee Campus Schaerbeek,**
136 Avenue Huart Hamoir, 1030 Schaerbeek.

SITE VISIT LOCATION: On the morning of **Friday, 26 September**, a limited-capacity site visit will be organized for interested participants at **Elmer Noord House of the Child (Vooruitgangstraat 319, 1030 Schaerbeek)**.

To accommodate demand, Elmer's management will host two groups of twenty participants each, offering an immersive look at their innovative family support model.

First visit: 9h30-10h30

Second visit: 10h45-11h45
