

Structural indicators on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2016 ^[1]

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Introduction

Early childhood education can positively influence children's development. The European Commission therefore wants all young children to be able to access and benefit from high quality education and care. Reliable information on early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in Europe is essential in order to understand what challenges are facing European countries, what we can learn from each other, and what new solutions might be developed to meet the needs of the youngest members of society.

The structural indicators in this chapter provide an overview of key developments in ECEC systems. The choice of indicators was underpinned by two key European documents: the 2011 Commission Communication on ECEC and the 'Proposal for key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care' (European Commission, 2014) produced by the ECEC thematic working group under the auspices of the European Commission. In addition, the selection drew on the extensive analysis of the research literature carried out for earlier publications, which helped to identify the main elements of ECEC provision that contribute to providing children with the best possible start in life (for an overview, see EACEA/Eurydice, 2009; OECD, 2012).

The 'Proposal for key principles' referred to above (European Commission, 2014) identified five main aspects of quality in early childhood education and care: access, workforce, curriculum, evaluation/monitoring and governance/funding. Seeing children as active participants in their own learning, the proposal highlights that parents are the most important partners and their participation is essential if high-quality ECEC is to be delivered. It also stresses that determining what constitutes high-quality ECEC should be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process.

However, considering the vast range of possible system-level information and having in mind the limitations of scope and time, only several essential and robust indicators have been chosen for yearly monitoring. The diagram [in full report] indicates the ECEC structural indicators covered in the 2016 Eurydice data collection.

More detailed information on these and other ECEC areas can be found in the Eurydice report Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe 2014 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014a), the main findings of which are summarised in the Eurydice Brief (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014b). More detailed information about the ECEC systems in each country can be found in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in Europe: National Information Sheets 2014/15 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

The definition of early childhood education and care (ECEC) used in this report is:

'provision for children from birth through to primary education that is subject to a national regulatory framework, i.e., it must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. It includes public, private and voluntary sectors. Only centre-based provision is considered.'

Many European countries structure ECEC services according to the age of the children. Usually, the transition from the first phase to the second takes place when children are around 3 years old. In order to reflect the different regulations, a distinction between provision for 'children under 3 years old' and provision for 'children of 3 years and over' is often made in this chapter. However, it is important to keep in mind that in some countries the transition can be as early as 2½ years or as late as 4 years of age. National System Information Sheets specify when children move from one phase of ECEC to the next in each country (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

Some European countries have several types of ECEC provision. The indicators show if a certain measure is available in the main type of ECEC provision for each age group.

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