

Discussion paper: Provision of quality early childcare services^[1]

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Author: Melhuish, E.

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Introduction

Increasingly, childcare provision and use involves multiple factors. Childcare systems in EU countries combine elements of labour market and parental leave policies, as well as a broad range of childcare possibilities. Parental leave is relevant, as are employment regulations in terms of whether they allow for flexibility in the labour market, with opportunities to work part-time, flexible or atypical hours, which can help parents with childcare provision.

Preschool childcare or Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has two major functions. Firstly the availability of childcare is a major factor determining parents' participation in the labour market. Secondly ECEC can play a role in influencing children's short-term and potentially long-term development. Governments frequently focus on one of these functions, and neglect the other. This is a mistake as preschool childcare or ECEC will inevitably have an influence on both parental employment and children's development and it is negligent for a government to ignore this fact.

The nature of societies is changing and, as change occurs, employment patterns change, cultural values change, and the demand for particular levels and kinds of skills and attributes for the future population, will also change. There are various estimates of the nature of employment in the future. However it appears that the need for skills will increase, and those skills that are needed will change so that adaptability in the workforce will be a great advantage. How can governments prepare their populations for such a future? It is increasingly apparent that the preschool period plays a critical role in the formation of adult skills and attributes. As the Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman put it, "Like it or not, the most important mental and behavioural patterns, once established, are difficult to change once children enter school" (Heckman & Wax, 2004). The importance of ECEC in the development of skills amongst the population, as well as for reducing social inequalities, has been recognised in reports of the OECD. To quote one OECD report on PISA results, "Widening access to pre-primary education (ECEC) can improve both overall performance and equity by reducing socio-economic disparities among students, if extending coverage does not compromise quality" (OECD, 2010).

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