

Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe ^[1]

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Excerpted from the executive summary

TOWARDS HIGH QUALITY ECEC FOR EVERY CHILD IN EUROPE

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) – the phase before primary education – is increasingly acknowledged as providing the foundations for lifelong learning and development. The European Pillar of Social Rights declares that 'children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality'. In order to establish a shared understanding of what this means, the Council adopted a Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in May 2019.

This report, the second edition of Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe, supports policy development by providing an up-to-date analysis of the ECEC systems in 38 European countries. This international comparative work is structured around the five quality dimensions emphasised in the Recommendation: governance, access, staff, educational guidelines as well as evaluation and monitoring. The findings reveal that there is still some way to go before the policies necessary to ensure quality in these key dimensions are firmly embedded in all European ECEC systems. Universal access, high quality and integration of ECEC services have not yet been achieved in many European countries.

In Europe, most children start primary education around age 6. Currently, 31 million children under this age live in the European Union and are potential users of ECEC. However, not all of them are able to access this provision. On average, 34 % or approximately 5 million children under age 3 attend ECEC. Only seven EU Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) as well as Norway guarantee a place in publicly funded provision for each child from an early age (6 to 18 months). Accessibility is considerably better for older children. Almost half of European countries guarantee a place in ECEC from age 3, with a growing number of countries making attendance compulsory during the last year(s) of ECEC. Consequently, the Education and Training (ET 2020) benchmark whereby at least 95 % of children should participate in early childhood education as of age 4 has now been reached.

Good quality ECEC for children under age 3 is not yet available in many European countries. Clear educational content for all children, delivered by highly qualified staff and supported by consistent policies is mostly found in the Nordic, Baltic and Balkan regions. These countries provide integrated ECEC services for all children under primary school age. Nevertheless, some of them still struggle to guarantee access for every child and have low participation rates.

The types of ECEC services and their quality differs according to children's age in most parts of Europe. Children in most Central and Southern European countries encounter changes as they move from childcare-type settings to education-focused pre-primary schools around age 3. However, the traditional division between the childcare and pre-primary education phase is blurring with many countries introducing educational guidelines or curricula for younger children.

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