

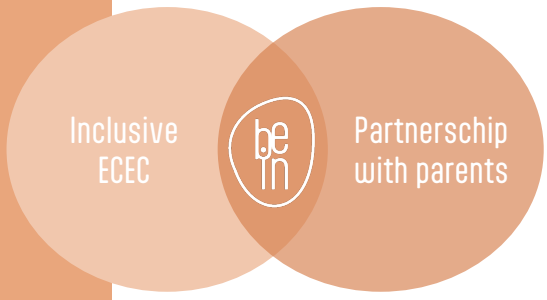
Photo: Caroline Boudry, VBJK

Stories and experiences from Be-In
An overview

Building partnership with parents in inclusive ECEC

Co-funded by the European Union

Engaging with and reaching out to parents is essential in ensuring quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for young children[1]. According to researchers this collaboration is even more crucial for parents of a child with special needs, to enable meaningful inclusive practices. However, professionals still encounter difficulties in transforming this vision into actions. This requires professionals who consider parents as co-educators within a strength-based perspective, but also that organisations create conditions in order for professionals to be able to listen and dialogue with parents on a daily and reciprocal basis. [2,3]



The Be-In Erasmus+ project emerged from a shared need identified in three partner countries—**Portugal, Belgium, and Iceland—**to strengthen the voices of parents and foster more effective partnerships between ECEC professionals and families within inclusive ECEC environments. The focus was on exploring the nuanced and complex interplay between inclusion and partnership with parents.

How to strengthen the competences of ECEC professionals in building partnership with parents within inclusive ECEC?

Each local consortium - bringing together partners from research, practices, and policy - engaged in a three-year **action research**, with two pilots ECEC centres in each country. From an initial analysis of their context and specific learning questions, each pilot implemented, tested, adjusted innovative practices. They engaged in a reflective process, through training, intervisions, and jobshadowing trajectories. They shared their learning experiences through the Be-In outputs: case studies, reflective tools and the coaching tool “Connecting with parents”.

OBJECTIVES

*"It's easy to say that we see parents as experts. But as the project progressed, we increasingly realised how little we truly understood about what that actually means—and how much we still have to learn about adapting our practices and actions to genuinely put it into practice" (**Be-In** ECEC partner)*

*"It was more than just a childcare arrangement; it was a support system that allowed the twins to flourish – especially S, who has a disability – while giving the mother the space to regain her own strength." (**Be-in** research partner)*

(1) To gain a **deeper understanding of the policy, research, and practice** on two topics: inclusion of children with special needs in ECEC and partnership with parents.

(2) To strengthen the competences of ECEC professionals and organisations in **developing, implementing, and evaluating new practices** that contribute to building trusting partnership with parents in inclusive ECEC settings.

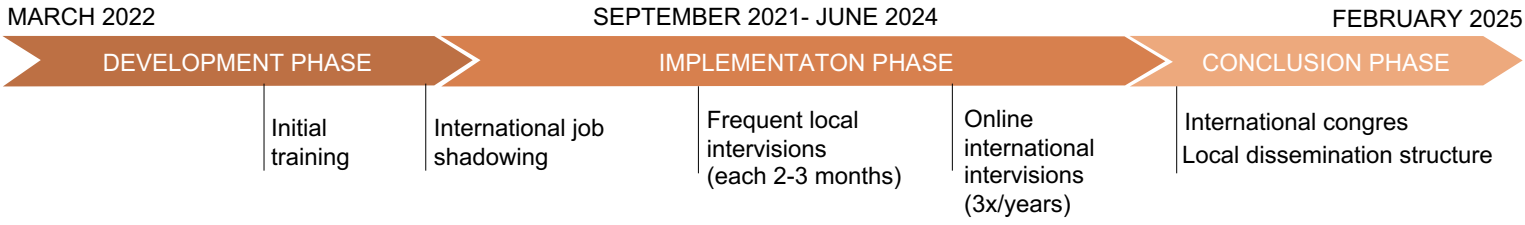
(3) To facilitate tr**ansnational learning** for ECEC professionals, via international training, jobshadowing trajectories and intervision sessions.

(4) To **equip trainers, ECEC coordinators, and local/regional authorities responsible for ECEC** with state-of-the-art knowledge, inspirational examples of good practices, and methods to support the ECEC sector in building partnership with parents in inclusive ECEC.

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

In each country, two pilots ECEC centres and a research partner were engaged in an action research process:

- **Development phase:** to sketch their baseline situation (vision, values, practices, from the voices of parents and staff), to define their own learning questions (refined through training and jobshadowing trajectories).
- **Implementation phase**: from their own action plan, to implement, experiment, document, evaluate and adjust new practices in their ECEC centre, periodically reflect on their practices during local and international intervisions.
- **Conclusion phase:** to plan sustainability and dissemination of new practices, methods and tools.



*"ECEC professionals often come to us saying, 'I'm concerned about a child, but I'm not sure how to bring it up with the parents.' As a team, we take that as a starting point — reflecting together, brainstorming, and finding thoughtful ways to approach the conversation." (partner from **De Blauwe Lelie, Belgium**)*

It led them to revitalise conversations with parents about their child's development, and to review the use observation and conversation tool, aiming at increasing the confidence of ECEC professionals in doing so.

*" It was an inclusive school with segregation… It was like two workplaces in one. There was special education on one side, preschool on the other." (partner from **Suðurborg, Iceland**)*

They noticed that once a child received a diagnosis, the more meetings the parents had with the special education team, the less contact they had with the teacher—who was still the one most present in the child's daily life. They proposed structural changes to address this imbalance.

*"A real turning point in the Be-In project was the job shadowing experience. When we visited De Bron in Belgium, we saw how comfortable parents were being in the group—just chatting naturally with the educator. That moment really stayed with us. (partner from **Shalom, Portugal**)*

They started questioning their own practices to understand what hinders parents to come in to the groups and what can help ECEC professionals to proactively invite them and create warm and welcoming conditions.

Find more inspiration in the narrative case studies of the pilots in three countries:
https//www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in

LESSONS LEARNED

- The Be-In partners started with the conviction that respect for parents is very important. They already saw them as an expert on their child, but they learned that critically reflecting on partnership is an ongoing professional obligation.
- In collaborating, the Be-In partners empower AND the child AND the parent AND the professional. One cannot go without the other.

*"Including the child's voice in meetings has proven to be successful and is now part of nearly every team discussion. We're integrating these practices into Múlaborg's framework, alongside our strategies to further empower parents in these meetings." (partner from **Múlaborg, Iceland**)*

- The rights of children are fundamental to this project. By giving children a voice in our collaborative processes, Be-In partners learned to better observe and discuss the specific needs of each child.

*"Reflection was something that really stood out to us—we realised we hadn't been doing it much before. With the input from Be-In, we've become more critical of what we do and are now focused on how to improve our approach with both parents and children. Of course, change always brings some resistance, but there was a lot of openness within the team." (partner from **Bela Vista, Portugal**)*

*"You can't build a relationship of trust with parents if you don't take full responsibility for including their child in the group. It's through the effort and commitment to inclusion that trust is strengthened. As a childcare worker, you take parents along on this journey, and in turn, they help guide you in your search for better inclusion." (partner from **City of Ghent, Belgium**)*

- The Be-In partners are more open for an ongoing discussion on what inclusion means in daily practices, instead of searching for a fixed definition.

- The Be-In partners developed throughout the project, becoming more open-minded and flexible in their approach to partnering with parents. They aim to be sensitive to the various situations and contexts, adapting their methods accordingly.
- To implement innovative changes in ECEC, it is essential to involve all different layers of professionals in the organisation and important stakeholders in the community from the beginning.
- The ECEC centres play a central role in the inclusive network surrounding the child and family, working closely with specialised support. The Be-In partners also realised that it is crucial to maintain a balance in power dynamics within this network.

*"Some childcare workers found it difficult to start conversations with parents, but now, it is openly discussed. Be-in allowed me to get a mandate to talk about it.» (partner from **De Bron, Belgium**)*

- They focused heavily on building and maintaining a relationship of trust with parents. They realised how small actions, starting from the very first moments, can make a significant difference, and how important it is to remain mindful of this in their daily practices.

OUTPUTS

At the local level, in each pilot / ECEC centre: New internal documents and procedures (e.g. invitation for team meetings with parents, guidelines for the first discussion with parents, etc.)

2 customisable PowerPoint presentations to share and discuss 'state-of-the-art' knowledge about inclusion with professionals and stakeholders

From Iceland, Belgium and Portugal: 3 narrative case studies report, describing the innovation process of each ECEC centres, as inspiration: challenges, questions, solutions, 'aha' moments, etc.

'Connecting with parents': A reflective coaching tool to support ECEC professionals in strengthening all aspects of partnership with parents, from the first contact. Available in 4 languages (EN, NL, PT, IS)!

Find more inspirational resources in our catalogue and website: https://vbjk.be/en/project/be-in

[1] European Commission (2021).*Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care.*
[2] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2017). *Inclusive Early Childhood Education: New Insights and Tools – Contributions from a European Study.*
[3] European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022). *Voices into Action – The Voices of Learners and their Families in Educational Decision-Making: Literature Review.*

THE BE-IN CONSORTIUM

ICELAND

ECEC system:



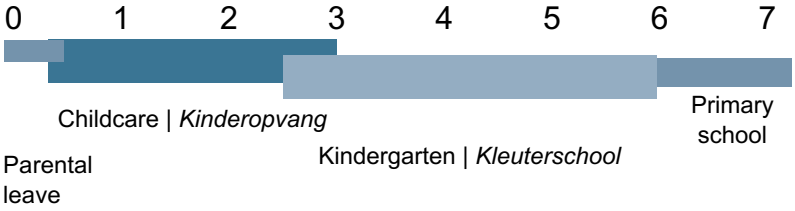
University of Reykjavik
City of Reykjavik

Suðurborg 'play'school

Múlaborg 'play'school

BELGIUM (FI)

ECEC system:



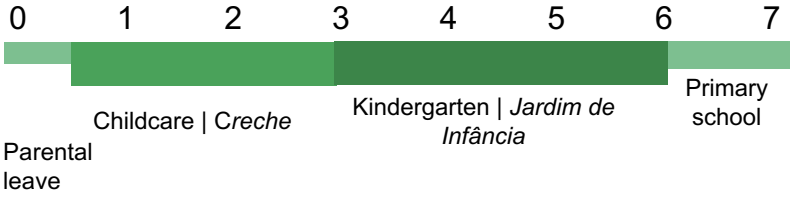
VBJK
Ghent University
Upbringing Agency

De Bron
(City of Ghent)

De Kleine Wereld
(De Blauwe Lelie, Bruges)

PORTUGAL

ECEC system:



University of Aveiro

Bela Vista
(Águeda)

Shalom
(Águeda)


Be-In Consortium, October 2022

Co-funded by the European Union