

# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ①

## Access: an entitlement for all children



This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



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## Access: an entitlement for all children

This principle says: "Access is a right of all children. All children should be entitled to a place in services for young children, irrespective of: any disability or other special needs they may have; where they live; family income or other circumstances, including whether or not their parents are employed. This entitlement for children is not an alternative to maternity or parental leave, which is already an entitlement for all European parents; both are needed and both are of value to children and parents."

## What does this principle mean?

What do we understand by the right of all children to attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) services up to the mandatory school age?

This principle aims to ensure that all children and their families can enjoy all of the potential benefits of quality ECEC services as set out in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 29). For Children in Europe, this means guaranteed access to quality ECEC services for all children. The opportunity to use these services must exist regardless of the child or his/her family characteristics and be guaranteed by the availability of quality services that are equally accessible regardless of economic, geographical, cultural or social factors. This is about the voluntary use of services. Attendance should not be compulsory; instead, services must ensure that they are responsive and welcoming to all children, families and communities.

The term ECEC ‘services’ is used to describe the many different forms of provision for groups of children within policies and programmes run by or regulated by public authorities, rather than private arrangements between individuals. These are services with multiple and complex purposes and objectives, combining education, care and family support. They can help to promote educational, social and economic equality for children and their families, and equality between men and women in the sharing of paid and unpaid work.

## What is the basis of this principle?

This principle is based on observations of the educational, social, cultural and economic benefits of children attending high-quality ECEC facilities.

In **sociopolitical terms**, a great deal of empirical research and evaluation has highlighted the benefit of developing these services. The take-up of ECEC services is an important factor in reducing inequalities between men and women with regard to their participation in the labour market and the sharing of domestic tasks. A reduction of these inequalities also has a positive impact on fertility, which will be a major factor in achieving a balance between the productivity of young adults and an ageing population in the future. On the other hand,

broad and early access to ECEC services contributes to achieving the EU objective of economic development based on a high level of training among the population. Within the knowledge economy and lifelong learning strategy, the education of tomorrow’s adults from the earliest possible age is increasingly seen as self-evident, and the availability of childcare for adults in training is crucial. Where children from families in precarious circumstances or social isolation attend ECEC facilities, this can also be an opportunity for them to gain support and find points of reference as well as a way of promoting socioeconomic inclusion: so much so, that investment in the pre-school sector is considered to offer a sound financial return.

From a **childhood perspective**, there can be no universal answer to the question of what children should expect from attending a pre-school facility. Answers will depend on people’s values and on the social representations of childhood, education, the status of women and the family. In European countries, parents and the family play an essential part in a child’s upbringing, but as they are not isolated from society, they remain part of a complex system of educational relationships within which the child develops and where ECEC services have their place. In theoretical terms, there are beneficial effects on a child’s cognitive, sensory, emotional, linguistic and social development. However, these are potential benefits because in reality they depend on the quality of ECEC. Indeed, current empirical research emphasises the potentially adverse impact of mediocre services on children, especially from families with scarce educational, social or material resources.

**ECEC services** aim to produce a variety of benefits, depending on the particular programme or context. Where objectives relate to promoting *equal opportunities* between men and women, the benefits have to do with helping parents to reconcile family and working life. These can be generated by greater flexibility in opening hours and by offering a diversity of services and features that meet the needs and preferences of parents. Where the aim is to *combat social and economic inequalities*, the objectives relate to children’s cognitive development, seeking to reduce the impact of parents’ low socioeconomic status and lack of education on their child’s performance at school. These objectives can be successfully achieved where young children attend quality ECEC facilities. Other approaches include *global*

*development objectives* for children and emphasise social skills, self-esteem and wellbeing within a pedagogical approach combining care, education and allowing the child's voice to be heard. There are also specific approaches that centre on the *child 'here and now'* rather than in the future, within an overall view that focuses on the way in which a child interacts socially. From this standpoint ECEC facilities are considered as places where children have their first social contact with children and adults from outside their own families. This is a way of building their social skills: learning to be with others, to co-operate, to manage difference and to engage with shared meanings outside their family circle. Such endeavours prepare children for living in contemporary society, a society that is increasingly marked by diversity.

## Accessibility - a key issue

A right for all children to attend ECEC services is advocated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and comment 7 on its application to young children: "Potential discrimination in access to quality services for young children is a particular concern, especially where health, education, welfare and other services are not universally available and are provided through a combination of State, private and charitable organizations. [...] actions may be required that guarantee that all children have an equal opportunity to benefit from available services" (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1; 20 September 2006).

Whilst all European countries have adopted some form of policy on pre-school education and care, accessibility is a factor that varies from one country to another. The recognition of a right of access for all children under school age is not widespread and even if it were, would do little to guarantee the actual use of services by families wishing to do so. Services must be available but also equally accessible geographically, financially and culturally as well as legally, particularly for those without legal residence.

From a theoretical point of view, two models are generally contrasted: universal access and targeted access. The universal access model recognises the social rights of all citizens and members of a society. The targeted access model seeks to concentrate public funding on specific social needs that are considered as having priority. A third model is currently emerging, based on the universal access model and taking into account the concept of equity in the use of services by groups that are more specifically targeted.

## THE 'UNIVERSAL' APPROACH

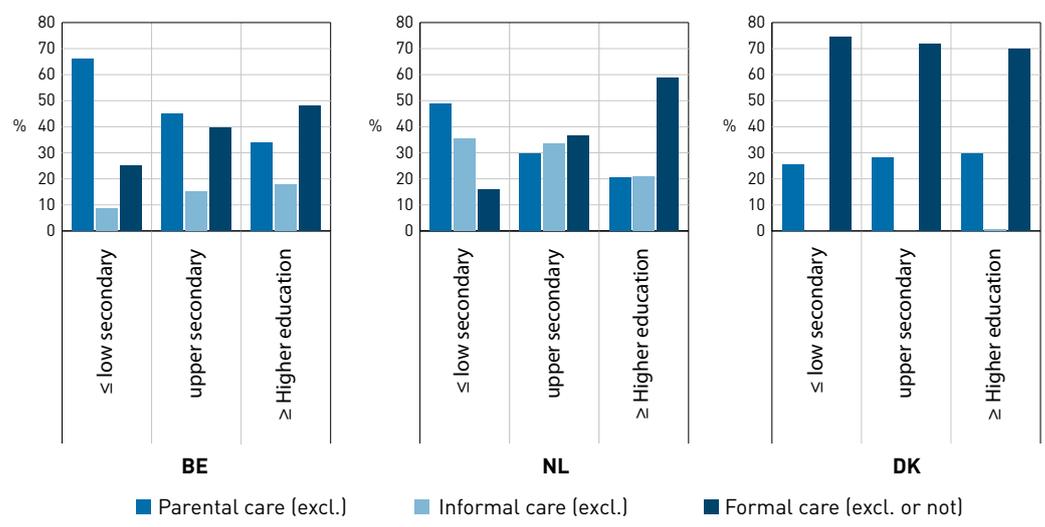
The 'universal' approach considers that all individuals, as citizens and members of society, are entitled to assert their social rights. This approach particularly acknowledges collective responsibility for choices concerning the family life where young children have been confined for a long time. The model of universal access can be extended to cover services for pre-school children, and to offer the same benefits as school education, i.e. to supply education and socialisation for all children, to support social, economic and cultural diversity and to prevent social exclusion. However, this equal access model has its own limits. Actual take-up can only be guaranteed if it recognised as a child's right and if services are geographically accessible, affordable, and geared towards cultural and social diversity.

## TARGETED ECEC POLICIES

In practice, targeted ECEC policies apply to two groups: children of working parents and those seen as disadvantaged through poverty, other circumstances or 'at risk'. These policies limit the potential benefits of ECEC services to specific groups, with the danger of being socially divisive and creating inequalities or further reinforcing those already existing.

**Services for children of working parents** chiefly target children under 3 years of age in order to promote equal opportunities for women and help them to reconcile work with family commitments. The risk inherent in opting for this policy is that of creating or reinforcing two kinds of inequality for children and families. The first is collective inequality caused by these policies rarely

Figure 1. Attendance at ECEC services for children under 3 years by social group (mother's level of education) - Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark - 2006



Source : Humblet&Amerijckx, 2009, EU-SILC (2006)

(1) Parental care: cared for solely by their parents, (2) Informal care: cared for solely by non-professionals, paid or unpaid, (3) Formal care (exclusive or not): children attending formal childcare at least once a week, which may be combined with parental care and/or informal care.

matching demand and frequently creating geographical inequalities. Secondly, social and educational inequalities in children can be reinforced. In fact, social isolation is a situation liable to create educational difficulties for very young children, particularly in households in socially precarious circumstances. Today ECEC services are virtually the unique, large-scale educational resource for very young children. When children with working parents are targeted as a priority, ECEC services play a much more important part in the education of children from more affluent families than for children from low-income backgrounds, where far fewer mothers are in work. This phenomenon is rarely documented by statistics. However, the figures below - based on the findings of the *Community Statistics on Income and Living Conditions* - survey (EU-SILC) of a representative population sample clearly demonstrate it. In countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, which have a targeted policy, attendance at ECEC services for children under 3 years is unequal, with higher attendance by more socially advantaged children (represented in the following graph by the mother's level of education). In Denmark or Sweden (not shown), attendance is similar for children from all social backgrounds.

Working on the assumption that such facilities offer quality care, ECEC policies based on the targeted model most likely contribute to reinforcing the social inequality of educational resources for the upbringing of very young children.

**Quality programmes targeting low-income and 'at-risk' families** go beyond the purely educational dimension to cover other aspects such as health, wellbeing and social support. Two strategies have been identified to ensure that these services are accessible: one that targets priority families and children directly and another targeting them indirectly using geographical priority areas. Direct targeting runs the risk of creating a social stigma, which almost inevitably goes hand-in-hand with the notion that 'a service for the poor is a poor service'. The strategy of targeting geographical areas, for its part, also fails as it does not cover the many priority families who live in non-priority areas; For example, it has been estimated that as many as half of the target population is not covered by the Sure Start scheme in the United Kingdom. Other limitations and adverse effects have also been pinpointed, chiefly that this model only has a positive impact if services are multidimensional

in nature, provided by well-trained professionals and adequately funded. Hence the cost of this model renders it less attractive politically. Moreover, in educational terms, it fails to offer the benefits of social diversity, and other children equally in need of education are arbitrarily deprived of it by the socioeconomic criteria used to identify potential beneficiaries.

### A THIRD MODEL

A third model has been developed recently to guarantee equity in use for all. It is a universal model that incorporates the concept of equity within a children's rights perspective. This means ensuring equity in use more than equality of access. For this purpose, these universal facilities should be sufficiently flexible, sensitive and adaptable to meet the social and individual needs of the most vulnerable children and should receive the necessary resources for these aims. An entitlement in principle is not enough; it must be matched by a commitment to make it a reality in practice.

#### KEY POINTS

- access to quality services is advocated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, 2006).
- The 'universal' approach is appropriate to implement this right.
- However, equal right do not lead automatically to equity in use, there must be quality services, geographically accessible and available, affordable, and geared towards cultural and social diversity.

## What is the European Union position?

In the European Union, access to education and care for young children was officially addressed in 1992 with the adoption by the Council of the European Communities on 31 March of a recommendation on childcare (92/241/EEC). This measure came within the Medium-term Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women. It recommended the introduction of measures to support the reconciliation of family and working life, in particular quality 'childcare services' that are geographically, economically and socially accessible and sufficiently flexible and diverse to meet parents' needs and preferences. The implementation of this recommendation has been subject to regular evaluation, but it was only at the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 that quantitative objectives were specified with a deadline of 2010. At the time the countries made a commitment to provide childcare facilities for 33% of children under 3 years of age and 90% of children between 3 and the mandatory school age. These commitments were reiterated in March 2006 in the European Pact for Gender Equality (7775/1/06/rev 1). However, the most recent evaluations agree in their prediction that the Barcelona objectives will not be achieved by 2010 (COM (2008) 638 final).

While these endeavours are to be welcomed, it should nonetheless be pointed out that such criteria only scratch the surface of the vast and complex issue of access to ECEC services. Indeed, the required coverage rates are quantitative objectives, which give no indication of the nature of places to be made available, quality requirements, whether opening hours are convenient or how affordable the services are. Consequently, decisions on such issues as access fall within the scope of national policy.

#### KEY POINTS

- The issue of access to ECEC services was officially raised in 1992 by EU (Recommendation on childcare - 92/241/EEC).
- Quantitative objectives were specified at the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 but such criteria only scratch the surface of the vast and complex issue of access.

### The European countries and guaranteed access to ECEC facilities for all children

All European countries acknowledge, in some form or another, their duty to pursue a policy on the education and care of pre-school-age children. Nonetheless, there remains a fairly wide variety of policies and methods of implementation.

#### THE RIGHT OF ACCESS

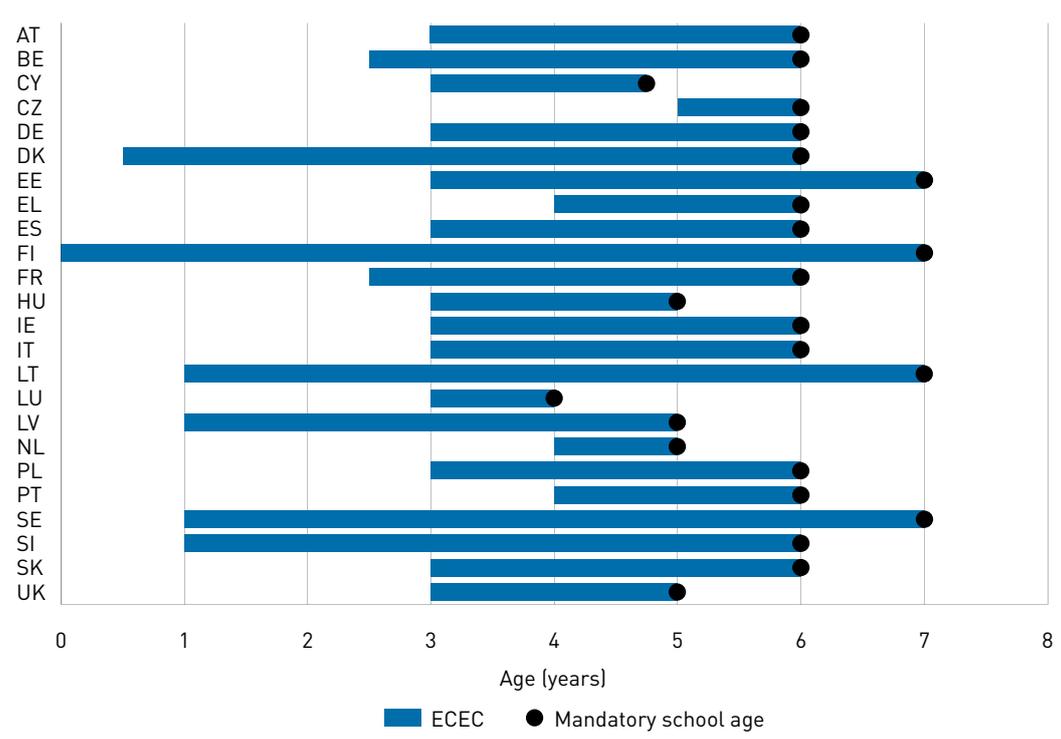
Recognition of the entitlement of all children between birth and the mandatory school age to education varies depending on the age of the child and the country (figure 2). It can be observed that all countries recognise this entitlement chiefly for children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old, except the Netherlands (4 years) and the Czech Republic (5 years). With the exception of Finland, which has no limit, the right of access for children of one year and over is recognised in Denmark (6 months), Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and Slovenia. These countries have an integrated system under the authority of a

single ministry. In the majority of the other countries, responsibility is split depending on a child's age, with the youngest covered by welfare departments and older children by education. All these countries recognise this right for children over three years of age within the education sector, where the principle of universal access is recognised without any specific conditions.

#### USE OF ECEC SERVICES

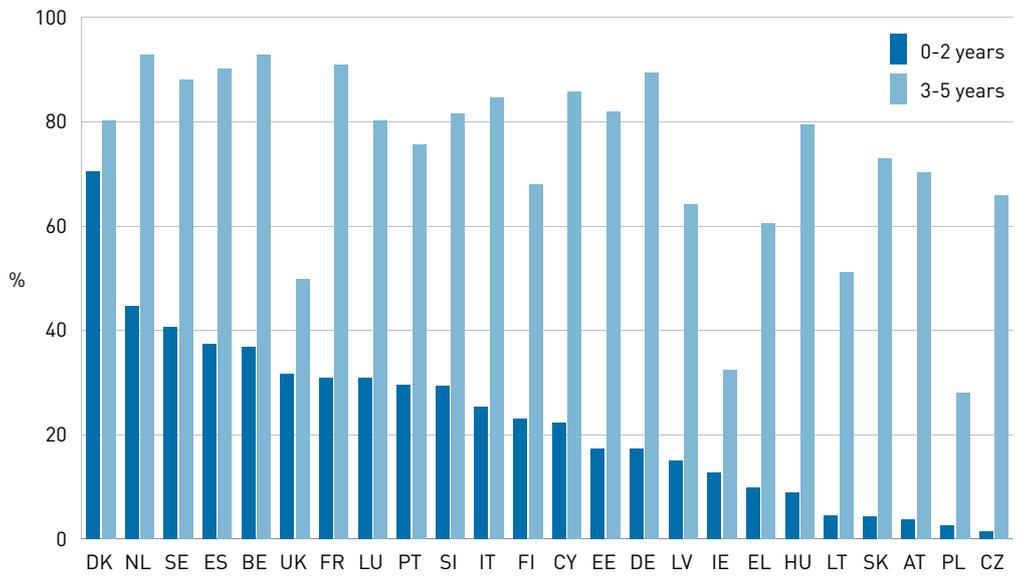
Figure 3 shows the percentage of children by age group who attend a formal childcare facility for at least one hour a week. It mostly depends on the existence of services which meet their needs and expectations, either free of charge or at a cost parents can afford. There is a huge international variation in the results for the under-3s, ranging from 1.5% (CZ) to 70.5% (Denmark). The degree of inequality can be calculated from the ratio between the highest and lowest values. Thus a child under 3 is 47 times more likely to be enrolled at an ECEC facility in Denmark than in the Czech Republic (70/1.5= 47). For children of 3 years and over, the rates

Figure 2. Recognised entitlement to ECEC before primary school - EU25



Source : Amerijckx G. [2009]

Figure 3. Percentage of children attending ECEC services for at least one hour a week by age group and country (EU25)



Source: Meulders et al. (2010). Data: SILC 2006

range from 28% (Poland) to 92% (Belgium and the Netherlands). Here the inequality ratio is 3.2 (92/28=3.2). Two observations can be made: enrolment figures are higher for older children, while there is greater inequality among younger children.

These figures are national averages. Many countries implement national policy on a decentralised basis, which creates geographical and territorial inequalities of access. Table 1 shows enrolment rates (or coverage rates depending on the country) for seven countries: the national rate, highest regional rate and lowest regional rate (at the EU-NUTS level 1)<sup>1</sup>. It is apparent that regional inequality varies between 1.2 in Sweden and 8.1 in Spain, which has the broadest disparities for the countries described.

Table 1. Enrolment rate geographical inequality in EU countries (Meulders et al, in press)

	National rate (1)	Regional rate Max. (2)	Regional rate min. (3)	Rate ratio (2/3)
IT	7,4	11,1	2,6	4,3
HU	8,5	13,3	3,7	3,6
AT	9,0	12,5	6,3	2,0
ES*	12,9	26,8	3,3	8,1
BE	24,8	40,2	17,1	2,4
FI	26,2	27,2	19,8	1,4
SE	56,2	61,3	51,7	1,2

Source: Amerijckx, G. (2009)

\* Except for Canaries  
Years: AT, BE, FI (2006); SE (2005); ES (2003); HU (2001); IT (2000)

**KEY POINTS**

- All EU countries recognise some entitlement for all children before the mandatory school age
- This recognition is chiefly for children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old, except in countries where all preschool children is under the authority of a single ministry
- There are huge inequalities in attendance between countries, between the age groups 0-3 and 3-6, and between regions

<sup>1</sup> Difficulty in accessing complete regional data has obliged us not to include all ECEC service categories, which explains why the national rates and the official rates are not entirely comparable.

## Experience of several countries

**Sweden** recognises a right to access from one year of age (figure 2) and voluntary attendance at facilities up to the age of 6. The initial results of a reform of the ECEC system carried out between 2000 and 2003 serve to illustrate what has been said in this dossier about the links between accessibility of services and their actual use. The reforms applied to a number of different aspects of accessibility. They improved financial accessibility by a reduction in the monthly registration fees for the great majority of families and the introduction of an annual minimum of 525 hours free of charge for all children over 4. A third measure was designed to enhance social accessibility by guaranteeing a minimum of 15 hours per week at an ECEC facility for children whose parents are unemployed or on parental leave. Between 2000 and 2004, this reform increased the average proportion of children aged between 1 and 5 years attending ECEC facilities from 65% to 75% and reduced geographical disparities to the particular benefit of the most rural areas. A marked increase was observed among children of parents who were unemployed or on parental leave. Local authorities everywhere have indicated that some children attend only during periods that are free of charge, leading to daily variations in the size of the groups of children. These innovations were carried out with increased State support and have led to a need for more planning within facilities in order to maintain the desired quality. This reform indicates that improving the accessibility of services has a positive impact on use, and that where services are accessible and of high quality, there is no need to make attendance compulsory.

In **Denmark** the policy is managed by the *Ministry of Social Affairs (2009)* and out in an independent legislation on day-care facilities (*Act on Day-Care, After-School and Club Facilities, etc. for Children and Young People, 2007*). This legislation stipulates that all parents may apply for a place for their child in a facility as soon as the child is 6 months old (i.e. at the end of maternity leave). Entitlement to ECEC services is recognised as a right of the child regarded as a full citizen. Local agencies work together under the auspices of the local authority to ensure that a place is made available as soon as possible and that the parents are informed of the date so that they can make the necessary arrangements. Parents are legally entitled to choose between ECEC service or a family day carer, but they cannot choose the specific

facility. However, in practice a family day carer is usually the only option available for the youngest children.

In **Belgium**, access to the *écoles maternelles* is universal for all children aged 2½ years or more and there are no fees for attendance. Preschool education is socially valued. From the age of 3 actually almost all children are enrolled at nursery school. Indeed, the funding system allows nursery schools to adjust the supply of services to demand. It is based on the number of children enrolled, which is reviewed five times annually for the first section for children aged 2½ years, who can enrol throughout the year. This regular adjustment of personnel and operating costs to the number of children enrolled avoids a lack of places. However, access became more problematic in the Brussels region where a sharp increase in the number of children took place over the last few years. Indeed, there is now a need to build new schools, which takes time. New measures should be taken in between in order to prevent a simultaneous negative impact on preschool access for the most socially vulnerable children.

### KEY POINTS

Where available, affordable quality services are supplied:

- Demand in the population exceeds largely the needs derived from parental employment
- There is no need to make attendance compulsory

## Next steps

Overall, in order to make ECEC services accessible to all children at European level, the top priority is to widen the age groups for which countries recognise the right of access to high-quality services, within a children's rights perspective.

The recognition of the right to access universal and high-quality services for at least 3 years prior to primary school must be harmonised between the Member States. With regard to younger children, two stages can be identified. First, the recognition of the right of children to full-time attendance at high-quality facilities depending on the needs of the family, and second, the recognition of the universal right of all children to attend high-quality services on a part-time basis.

Recognising a right is not enough: measures must be taken to implement it equitably. Different national situations demonstrate that where services are of high quality and genuinely accessible, there is no need to make attendance compulsory in order to render it truly generalized.

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