

# Early childhood care: Accessibility and quality of services

## Executive summary

### Introduction

This report focuses on access to and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, two dimensions that have gained increasing importance in the political agenda in Europe since the 2011 Communication from the Commission *Early childhood education and care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*. More concretely, it presents evidence regarding the elements of working conditions and in-service training that increase the quality of early childhood education and care; it also presents examples of successful practices when it comes to making services more inclusive for children in a vulnerable situation. A systematic review of research studies from Europe identifies which types of training and which elements of working conditions have the greatest influence on the quality of services. Such a review is a useful tool in providing policy guidance, as it gives a good overview of the aggregated results of different studies. As for the accessibility of services, the report describes good practices gathered in the form of case studies that have been evaluated and that describe additional resources for the inclusion of children with disabilities or learning difficulties, or who come from a disadvantaged background, in mainstream ECEC services.

### Policy context

For a long time the emphasis at the EU level was on the availability of ECEC places and on the relevance of ECEC for work-life balance, but the importance of quality and the role of ECEC in achieving social inclusion has become more prominent in the last decade. In its 2011 Communication, the European Commission highlights the situation of children with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages, reaffirming that high-quality ECEC is particularly beneficial for these groups and that ECEC provides an opportunity for early detection and intervention of learning difficulties. Similarly, the European

Commission recommendation *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* highlights the need to focus policies on children who face an increased risk due to multiple disadvantage and points out that ECEC should be of high quality, inclusive and affordable, as well as adapted to the needs of families. Current work from the OECD and the European Commission, regarding the quality of ECEC, highlights the importance of having a qualified and motivated workforce and the need to increase efforts to make services more accessible for children in a vulnerable situation.

### Key findings

**Benefits of continuing professional development:** Continuing professional development plays a key role, both in improving the outcomes of children using ECEC services and making services more inclusive. Studies included in an earlier systematic literature review contracted out by Eurofound show that training is more effective when it is integrated in the practice of ECEC centres – for instance, delivered in the workplace, dealing with practical issues, or involving coaching and/or discussions with colleagues. In the case of training courses lasting up to six months, a video feedback component has a positive impact on the language acquisition and cognitive development of children and on the competencies of practitioners in caregiving and language stimulation. Long-term pedagogical support to staff, provided by specialised coaches or pedagogical counsellors in reflection groups, was found to be effective in enhancing the quality of ECEC services over a long period of time. There is also evidence of its positive impact on children's cognitive and social outcomes.

**Training on inclusion:** Training on inclusion focuses on teaching practitioners how to interact with children, parents and staff from other organisations (for instance, Roma mediators). The incentives given to

increase the take-up of voluntary training courses include financial incentives, or some type of certification within the framework of a wider training scheme (for instance, becoming a licensed practitioner). To make services more inclusive for all children, emphasis is placed on ensuring that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the concept of inclusion.

**Differing quality of evidence:** Overall, the evidence available regarding the impact of working conditions on the quality of ECEC services is less robust than that of the studies dealing with training. This lack of robustness is an issue, as it is necessary to establish causality accurately in complex interventions such as ECEC. Some of the gaps identified in research include the impact of short-term training courses integrated into ECEC practices without a video feedback component, and the lack of integration of courses into the ECEC practice, as well as the impact on staff–child interactions of long-term training integrated into practices through the provision of continuous support to practitioners. Furthermore, there is a research gap regarding the retention of the effects of training over the longer term.

**Shortage of suitable studies:** While the systematic review process included a search for studies in all 28 EU Member States and in all the official languages of the EU, articles with the adequate scope and methodological design and rigour were found in only 12 countries (Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, Spain and the UK).

**Lack of robust evaluations of practice:** Similarly, there are few robust evaluations (such as randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental evaluations) of inclusive practices in ECEC, particularly when it comes to additional resources for children with learning difficulties. The views of children, who are the ultimate beneficiaries of these practices, are seldom part of the evaluations, which tend to focus on the views of practitioners and parents. Just under half the case studies were evaluated independently by external evaluators.

## Policy pointers

- In-service training is more effective when it is integrated in ECEC practice and includes some type of feedback element. Video feedback in training of less than six months' duration has proved effective in strengthening practitioners' care-giving and language stimulation skills. It also has a positive impact on children's language acquisition and cognitive development.
- More robust research evidence is needed on the impact of working conditions and inclusive practices.
- The added value of additional resources in inclusive practices can be increased by adapting existing training to different audiences (for instance, changing a course for parents to meet the needs of practitioners) or offering training resources online. In some cases, an incentive for ECEC centres to take part in the projects was the fact that they would have priority in getting extra funding in the future.
- Building partnerships between ECEC centres and institutions like non-governmental organisations or social services improves outreach to children in a vulnerable situation.
- Involving local authorities is perceived as essential in implementing the changes, as ECEC services cannot implement changes on their own (from a financial and from a policy leverage perspective). It also allows for continuous feedback and interaction between policy and practice. To establish effective partnerships with other stakeholders it is important to have a common understanding of the goals and how to achieve them.
- Joint activities for children with special needs and other children remove the stigma that can be associated with particular additional resources.
- The gap between mainstream provision and additional support measures has to be narrowed to make practices transferable and sustainable. In particular, the lack of qualified staff in mainstream ECEC services constitutes a serious barrier to making services more inclusive.

### Further information

The report, *Early childhood care: Accessibility and quality of services*, is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications>

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