



Eurydice Brief

Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe

2019

This Eurydice Brief highlights some of the main findings of the second edition of Eurydice report on 'Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe'.

After a short introduction of the European policy context on early childhood education and care (ECEC), this brief describes the main policy measures to ensure access specifying which countries guarantee a place in ECEC from which age. The brief shows in which countries ECEC services are available free of charge and in which countries parents pay the highest fees. The availability and regulations on home-based provision (offered by childminders) across Europe is also reviewed.

Aiming to provide an overview of the quality of ECEC, the brief includes information on governance, staff qualification requirements and educational content. Attention is also drawn to the different ways in which countries monitor ECEC quality as well as to the measures that enable a smooth transition to primary education.

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Authors EACEA

Akvilė Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister (coordination),
Marie-Pascale Balcon and
Isabelle De Coster

Layout and graphics

Patrice Brel

Contacts

Aikaterini Xethali
Communication and Publications
EACEA-EURYDICE@ec.europa.eu

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MAIN MESSAGES

- 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 early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. However, universal access and high quality of ECEC services have not yet been achieved in many European countries.
- The types of ECEC services and their quality often differs according to children's age. 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.
- 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.
- Availability of ECEC is low for children under age 3. 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).
- In Europe, most families have to pay fees for ECEC for children under age 3. Average monthly fees are the highest in Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland.
- Accessibility and affordability is considerably better for older children. Almost half of European countries guarantee a place in ECEC from age 3 (often free of charge). A growing number of countries make attendance compulsory during the last year(s) of ECEC.
- Qualification requirements for staff are usually lower for working with younger children than older ones. In the majority of education systems assistants may be employed without an initial qualification in ECEC. Only five education systems have made CPD mandatory for all ECEC staff (Luxembourg, Romania, Slovenia, the United Kingdom (Scotland) and Serbia).
- Compliance with structural norms and standards together with the evaluation of learning processes and daily interactions in the setting are essential parts of quality assurance. However, both structural and process quality is evaluated in only a minority of European countries. Children's voices are also rarely heard during the evaluation process.

EUROPEAN POLICY CONTEXT

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – the phase before primary education – is becoming an essential part of European education policy. The mid-term report on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) concluded that 'today's need for flexibility and permeability between learning experiences requires policy coherence from early childhood education and schools through to higher education, vocational education and training and adult learning' ⁽¹⁾. Since the early years are the most formative in a person's life, ECEC lays the foundation for successful lifelong learning.

EU leaders have recently established ECEC as one of the core social rights of European citizens. One of the 20 key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that 'children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality' ⁽²⁾. Moreover, it emphasises that 'children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities'. The call to move towards a European Education Area by 2025, however, recognised that there are deficiencies with respect to access, quality and affordability of ECEC ⁽³⁾.

*In Europe, children
have the right to
ECEC.*

The Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, adopted in May 2019 ⁽⁴⁾, highlights the possible actions Member States could pursue when working towards these goals. It endorses the EU Quality Framework for ECEC, which was put forward as a proposal by experts from various European countries in 2014 ⁽⁵⁾. This recommendation consolidates the concept of quality ECEC around five essential dimensions: access; staff; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; as well as governance and funding.

⁽¹⁾ COM/2015/0408 final.

⁽²⁾ Interinstitutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights (OJ C428, 13.12.2017, p. 10-15). Signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 17 November 2017 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

⁽³⁾ COM/2017/0673 final.

⁽⁴⁾ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4-14). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_2019.189.01.0004.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2019:189:TOC

⁽⁵⁾ Developed by the Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission.

ABOUT THE EURYDICE REPORT

The second edition of *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe* aims to feed into the European policy developments by providing an overview of the current national policies on ECEC in Europe. It comprised of five chapters corresponding to the five dimensions of the EU Quality Framework for ECEC: governance, access, staff, educational guidelines as well as evaluation and monitoring. Comprehensive country-level data on various ECEC system characteristics are also intended to support academic research in the field, thus expanding our knowledge of the services provided for young children and their families in Europe.

Definition of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Provision for children from birth through to compulsory primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e. which must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. It includes:

- public, private and voluntary sectors;
- centre-based as well as home-based provision (in the provider's home).

Most European countries provide different ECEC services for children under and over age 3.

Many European countries structure ECEC services according to the age of the children. Usually, the transition from the first phase to the second takes place when children are around 3 years old. In order to reflect the different regulations, a distinction between provision for children 'under 3 years' and for those aged '3 years and over' is often made. However, it is important to keep in mind that in some countries the transition can be as early as 2-and-a-half years or as late as 4 years of age ⁽⁶⁾.

The report is structured in two parts: (1) international comparison and (2) national information sheets. The brief highlights the main messages stemming from the comparative analysis. National system information sheets at the end of the full report provide a concise overview of the key features of each country's ECEC system. These national sheets include a visual representation of the principal elements of the ECEC structure in the form of a diagram, a description of the main types of ECEC provision, participation rates, the scope of the educational guidelines as well as a summary of current reforms.

The report covers 38 European countries (43 education systems), participating in the EU's Erasmus+ programme. It includes the European Union's 28 Member States as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey.

For more information on methodology and analysis, please refer to the full report. It is available online at:

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-%E2%80%93-2019-edition_en

⁽⁶⁾ The transition happens at age 2-and-a-half in Belgium (French and Flemish Communities) and at age 4 in Greece, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

ACCESS

Place guarantee: two ways of ensuring the right to ECEC

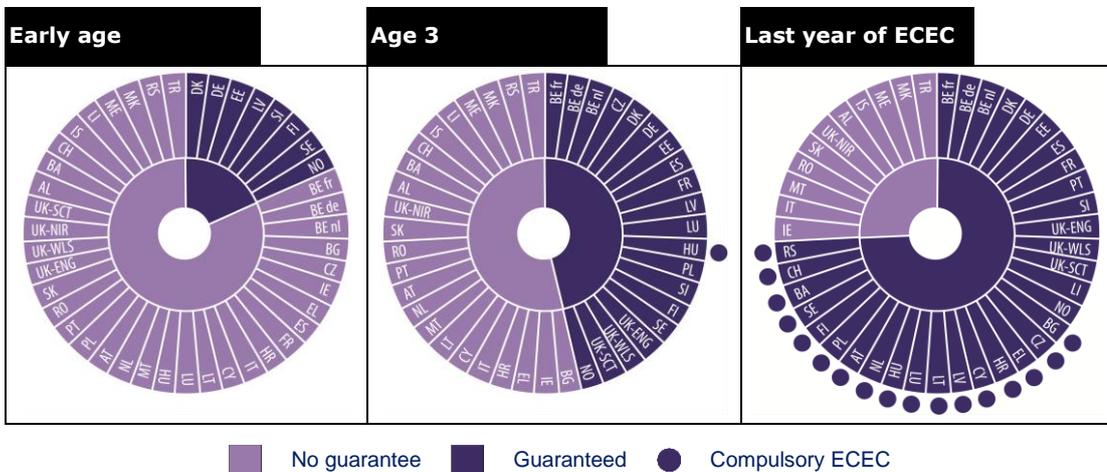
Currently, in Europe, there are two approaches to ensuring universal access to ECEC. Some countries provide a legal entitlement to an ECEC place, while others make ECEC attendance compulsory. Each approach requires public authorities to commit to guaranteeing a place in ECEC. However, there are some fundamental differences. A legal entitlement means a child has a right to ECEC, but when it is compulsory, a child has a legal obligation to attend. The nature of the place guarantee therefore differs. Under the legal entitlement, public authorities have to guarantee a place for any child in the age-range covered whose parents request it. In contrast, in countries where ECEC is compulsory, public authorities must guarantee a sufficient number of places for all children in the age range covered by the legal obligation.

Only eight European countries (DK, DE, EE, LV, SI, FI, SE and NO) guarantee a place in publicly funded provision for each child from 6 to 18 months.

In Europe, there are significant differences in the age at which children have a guaranteed place in ECEC (see Figure 1). Only seven EU Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) as well as Norway guarantee a place in ECEC for each child from an early age (6-18 months), often immediately after the end of childcare leave. A place in publicly subsidised ECEC is guaranteed from the age of 3 or a little earlier in the three Communities of Belgium, as well as in Czechia, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland and the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Scotland). Around a quarter of European education systems provide guaranteed places from age 4, 5 or 6 for the last 1-2 years of ECEC. Often, this provision is explicitly directed at preparation for primary education and is compulsory.

Most European countries guarantee between 20 and 29 ECEC hours a week. Weekly opening hours are often aligned with that of primary schools and reflect the educational focus of the provision. Guaranteed opening hours that cover parents' full-time working week are available only in a handful of countries (Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Slovenia and Norway).

Figure 1: Place guarantee in ECEC, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

For more information and country-specific notes, see Figures B1 and B3 in the full report.

A quarter of European education systems have no legal framework to ensure a place in ECEC. However, some of them still have high ECEC participation rates, usually from the age at which ECEC provision becomes part of the education system. For example, this is the case from age 3 in Malta and the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland), and from age 4 in the Netherlands. In Iceland, ECEC is widely available from age 2. Demand is nevertheless considered to be higher than supply during the last year before the start of primary education in the French Community of Belgium, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, Montenegro and Turkey.

Many European countries are introducing compulsory ECEC prior to starting primary education.

Many European countries have recently been extending the right to ECEC. During the last five years, five countries (Czechia, Croatia, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden) have introduced compulsory ECEC for one year prior to starting primary education. The period of compulsory attendance has been extended from one to two years in Greece and one to three years in Hungary. Moreover, a legal entitlement to ECEC has been introduced or extended in Czechia, Poland and Portugal.

Affordability: increasingly ECEC is offered free of charge to families of pre-school children

In Europe, most families have to pay fees for ECEC for the youngest group of children. The availability of ECEC free of charge increases noticeably at age 3 and this trend continues with each year of age, becoming almost universal across Europe during the last year before compulsory primary education starts.

Average monthly fees are the highest in IE, NL, UK and CH.

In order to ensure access, the provision of ECEC free of charge has to be accompanied by a place guarantee. Without the supporting legal framework that enforces the right to ECEC, this provision may be limited and waiting lists may be long with complex priority rules. However, currently only one European country – Latvia – guarantees a free public ECEC place for every child from as early as 1-and-a-half. In the remaining countries, most parents have to pay for ECEC in the earliest years. Average monthly fees are the highest in Ireland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland. For example, in Ireland, average monthly fees reach EUR 771. These countries rely on market-driven mechanisms to supply ECEC to children under age 3, although some subsidies for the most disadvantaged may be available.

Most countries have put in place policies to offer priority admission and fee reductions to vulnerable children and families. Children living in poverty are the most commonly targeted group. Family income is a widespread criterion, often used in combination with family composition. As a separate criterion – although largely correlated with poverty – the children of single parents often benefit from targeted measures.

Home-based provision offers flexibility in childcare services in some countries

Alongside centre-based ECEC, home-based ECEC is offered in most European countries. Typically, childminders provide care at their home for children under age 3 or even younger. They usually look after four to five children of this age.

Childminders form a significant part of ECEC services in only a few European countries. France is the only European country where more young children are with childminders than in centre-based provision (*crèches*). In eight countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Iceland), a

significant proportion of children under age 3 are cared for by childminders (7), but centre-based provision predominates.

Home-based ECEC has typically been more childcare- than education-oriented. It usually falls under the authorities responsible for family, children and social services. Fifteen education systems provide no educational guidelines for these services.

POLICY INTEGRATION: THE WAY TO HIGH QUALITY ECEC

Early childhood education and care – provision for children before the start of compulsory primary education – has two aspects:

- Care (or childcare): service mainly intended to enable parents to work while the child's safety and care is ensured
- Early childhood education: services with an intentional educational component to support child development and prepare for primary education.

Historically, childcare was the focus for younger children whereas early childhood education was the approach for older children in the years preceding primary education. Currently, an integrated 'early childhood education and care' approach is becoming more prominent. Confronted with the evidence that policy integration seems to offer better opportunities for both resource management and children's outcomes in terms of their holistic development (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss, 2010; European Commission, 2013), European countries are increasingly integrating their ECEC policies and regulations. Figure 2 lists the core dimensions of ECEC policy for an integrated system from birth to the start of primary education.

For a child and family, avoiding transition from one type of ECEC setting to another is an asset.

Figure 2: Dimensions of ECEC policy integration

WHERE	HOW	WHO	WHAT
Setting	Ministry	Staff	Curriculum
Single setting until the start of primary education	Coherent governance under one authority	Highly qualified professionals for under- and over-3s	Educational activities during the entire ECEC phase

Organisation of centre-based provision: unitary or separate settings

Looking from the child's point of view, the place where he or she attends ECEC is a central point of attachment and stability. Moving from one type of setting to another is a key transition period for both children and their families as it often means a change in

(7) The relative importance of home-based provision is based on national statistics and expert estimations. When data is available, home-based provision is considered significant if it constitutes at least 10 % of ECEC places.

group format/size, different staff, new rules and different types of activities. A period of adaptation is therefore essential for children. For these reasons, the setting structure is the key distinguishing factor when discussing the integration of the ECEC systems in this report ⁽⁸⁾.

In Europe, ECEC systems are organised in two main ways:

1. **Separate settings** for younger and older children with a transition usually around the age of 3. Typically, provision for the under-3s has a childcare focus, while pre-primary schools for older children emphasise educational goals.
2. **Unitary settings** for the whole age range, up until the start of primary education. Both care and early education form an integral part of the provision in unitary settings.

In most European countries, centre-based ECEC is provided in two separate types of setting according to children's ages (see Figure 3). Less than a third of the European countries analysed have only unitary settings. The unitary setting structure is mainly adopted in the Nordic countries as well as in several Baltic and Balkan countries ⁽⁹⁾. In a quarter of European countries, both separate and unitary settings are available.

In three quarters of European education systems, therefore, children must make a transition to a new setting, which also means crossing a structural boundary in the ECEC system. Top-level recommendations on how this change should be managed are rarely made; they are only provided in 10 education systems, namely Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Czechia, Denmark, Spain, France, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands and Portugal.

Governance: single or dual authority model

The organisation of ECEC provision and the rules that apply largely depend on the nature of its governance. Consigning the responsibility for the entire ECEC phase to a single ministry or top-level authority may help promote coherent policies and ensure better quality services (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss, 2010). This single authority model has been adopted in the majority of European education systems (see Figure 3). Unsurprisingly, all the countries that have unitary settings also benefit from this integrated system of governance. In these countries, the responsibility for ECEC is under the ministry for education.

In countries that have separate age-dependent settings, the dual authority model largely prevails. The responsibility for ECEC is thus divided between two different ministries (or top-level authorities). The ministry for education or another top-level education authority is responsible for the pre-primary education of children aged 3 and over, while the 'childcare-type' provision for children under age 3 falls under the remit of another ministry or public authority, usually that dealing with children or family affairs. Countries with both unitary and separate settings (mixed) tend to follow the single authority model with integrated governance.

There are a few exceptions: Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania have separate settings for the different age groups, but the governance of the entire ECEC phase falls under a single authority. In Luxembourg and Malta, the responsibility for services for younger children was recently transferred to the Ministry of Education in order to ensure

⁽⁸⁾ This approach is also used by the European Commission and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA, 2016).

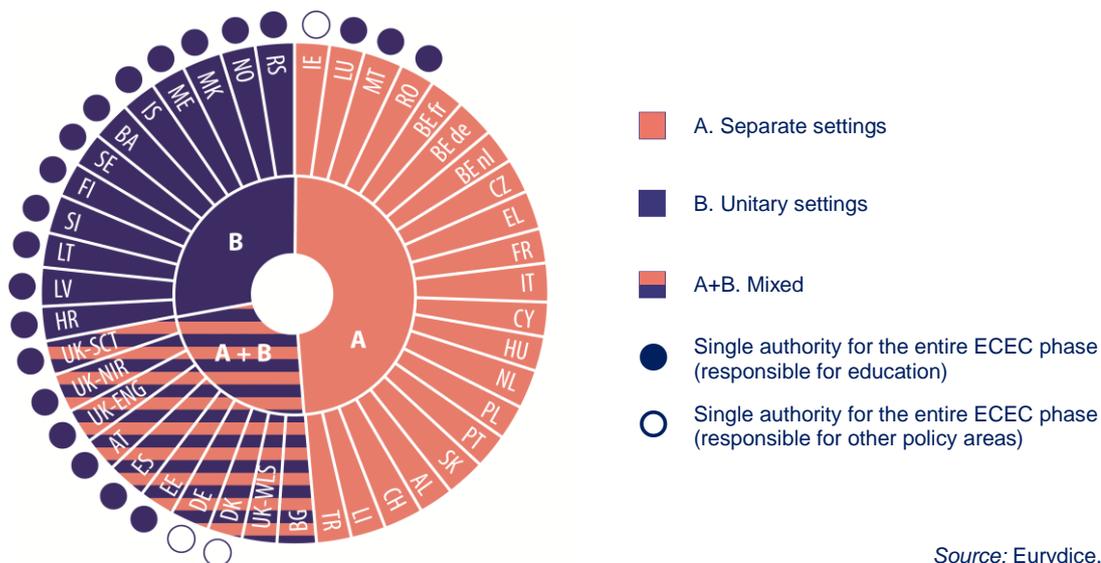
⁽⁹⁾ In Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway and Serbia.

The responsibility for ECEC is divided between two different ministries in half of the education systems.

greater policy coherence (in 2012 and 2017 respectively). Italy is also in the process of bringing ECEC under responsibility of the Ministry of Education, although the regions are still the main regulators of provision for under-3s.

In most of the countries with integrated governance, it is the education authorities that are in control. Denmark, Germany and Ireland are the only countries where other authorities responsible for children's services or family affairs have control of the entire ECEC phase.

Figure 3: Setting structure and governance, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

For more information and country-specific notes, see Figures A2 and A4 in the full report.

Highly qualified staff for the entire ECEC phase

ECEC staff support children's development, ensure their health and well-being and guide them in their daily routines and activities. The kinds of experiences children have largely depends on the people who are in charge. Highly qualified staff – trained at the Bachelor's level or higher – are more likely to use appropriate pedagogical approaches, create stimulating learning environments as well as provide good care and support. A high minimum entry requirement for ECEC staff is also important for raising the status and pay of the professionals who play such a key role.

However, as shown in Figure 4, only one third of European education systems require that at least one of the team members caring for a group of children, regardless of age, is highly educated ⁽¹⁰⁾.

In another third of the education systems, a high qualification level is considered essential during the second phase of ECEC (pre-primary education), but not during the first phase (childcare or early childhood educational development) ⁽¹¹⁾. Eight education systems have a lower qualification requirement (Czechia, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Austria, Romania,

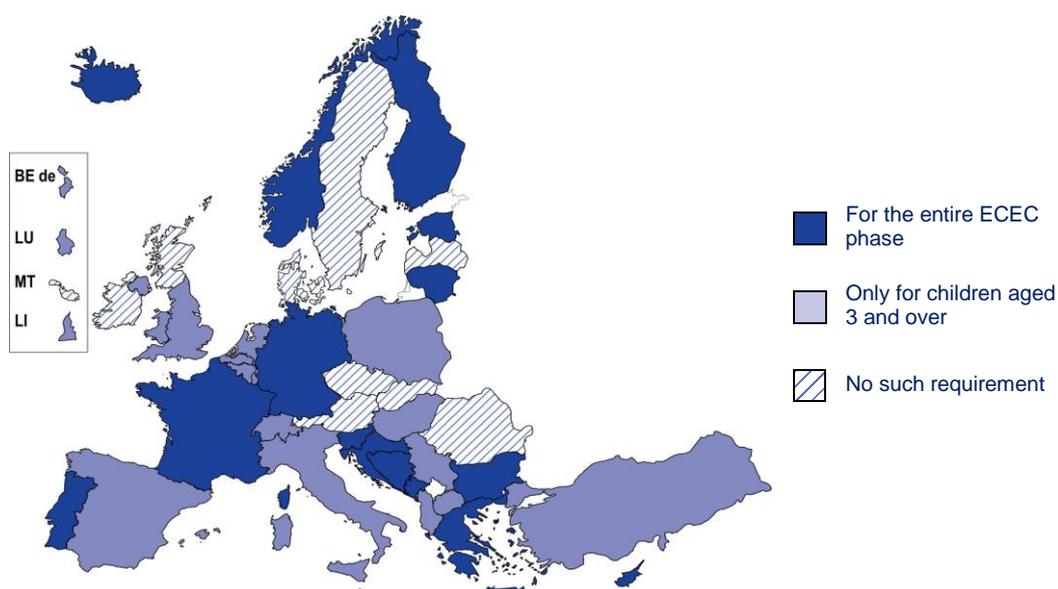
Staff qualification requirements are usually lower for working with younger children than older ones.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The minimum is at Bachelor's level (ISCED 6) in Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovenia, Finland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Norway. It is at Master's level (ISCED 7) in Portugal and Iceland. In France, it is at ISCED 6 in teams working with younger children and at ISCED 7 for those working with older ones. As of 2019/20, it will be at Bachelor's level for all core practitioners in Italy.

⁽¹¹⁾ This is the case in Belgium (all three Communities), Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), Albania, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Serbia, North Macedonia and Turkey.

Slovakia and the United Kingdom (Scotland)). In Denmark and Sweden ⁽¹²⁾, there are no top-level regulations on this matter.

Figure 4: Staff with a minimum of a Bachelor's level qualification (ISCED 6), 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The Figure shows whether at least one staff member per group of children in centre-based ECEC must have a Bachelor's level (ISCED 6) qualification or higher related to ECEC (or education) according to top-level regulations. For more information and country-specific notes, see Figure C1 in the full report.

Continuing professional development is mandatory for all staff only in five education systems (LU, RO, SI, UK-SCT and RS).

Establishing the initial qualification requirements for staff working with children is only the starting point in ensuring a well-qualified workforce. Continuing professional development (CPD) is also crucial as it allows employees to upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their career.

Only a quarter of the education systems make CPD mandatory for core practitioners working with younger children, specifying its minimum duration over a defined period of time (see Figure 5). A few more, but still less than half of the education systems, require CPD for core practitioners working with older children. Mandatory CPD usually means that support is offered to staff to participate in these activities, for example, CPD is provided during working time and the costs of courses or travel are reimbursed. This is not always the case in education systems where CPD is only a professional duty or is optional.

For assistants, mandatory CPD is very rare. Luxembourg, Slovenia and the United Kingdom (Scotland) are the only European education systems where all assistants must undertake CPD. Luxembourg has ECEC assistants only for one year (*éducation précoce*). In Slovenia and the United Kingdom (Scotland), assistants must spend the same amount of time on CPD as core practitioners. In France, only assistants working with older children are required to upgrade their knowledge and skills.

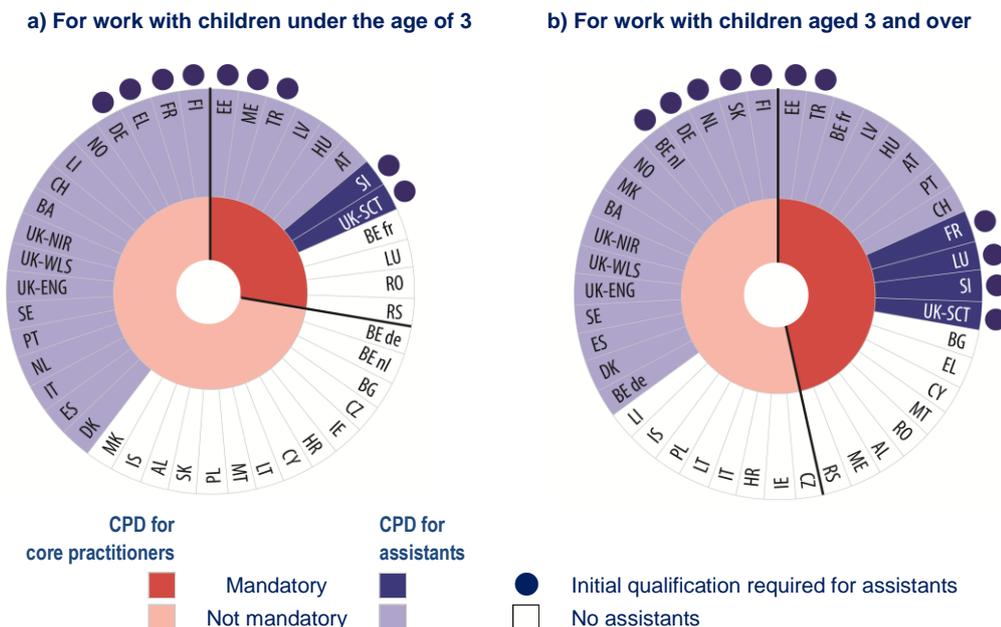
In many countries, ECEC assistants are not required to have an initial qualification related to their profession.

In half of the education systems that employ assistants, this type of staff are not required to have an initial qualification related to their profession. Moreover, assistants rarely have any obligation to undertake CPD activities. Therefore, a considerable proportion of staff engaged in daily activities with children are without any formal training related to ECEC.

⁽¹²⁾ In Sweden, in order to work with 6-year-olds in pre-primary classes, staff need to be qualified at ISCED level 6 or 7.

Figure 5: Mandatory continuing professional development (CPD) for all staff and initial qualification requirements for assistants, 2018/19

In most countries, teams including assistants share the responsibility for a group of children.



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

Core practitioner: an individual who leads practice for a group of children at the class- or playroom-level and works directly with children and their families. **Assistant:** an individual that supports the core practitioner(s) with a group of children or class on a daily basis. In the report, only assistants considered as essential staff members for all groups of children are taken into account. Assistants employed to meet specific needs (e.g. to provide extra support for groups that have children with special needs) or local circumstances are not considered. **Mandatory:** CPD is compulsory and the minimum amount of time to be spent on it is specified.

Where the top-level authority requires a minimum level of general education rather than a minimum initial vocational qualification to become an assistant in ECEC, the qualification is not shown.

For more information and country-specific notes, see Figures C2 and C7 in the full report.

Educational guidelines (curriculum): increasingly covering the entire ECEC phase

It is becoming increasingly accepted that early years' provision is the foundation for learning throughout life. Consequently, the top-level authorities in all European countries have issued official guidelines to ensure that settings have an intentional educational component. The content of these guidelines vary but they generally include developmental or learning goals and age-appropriate activities, sometimes in the form of a standard curriculum. They are intended to help settings improve the quality of care and learning and ensure that high standards are found across all ECEC services. However, in around a third of all European countries⁽¹³⁾ educational guidelines apply only to settings for children aged 3 and over (see Figure 6). In these countries, the split between 'childcare-type' provision and 'pre-primary education' remains.

A third of education systems do not provide educational guidelines for under-3s.

Whether or not top-level educational guidelines exist is largely determined by the type of governing authority in control. In almost all countries where a single authority is in charge of the whole ECEC phase, educational objectives or content are set for the whole age range⁽¹⁴⁾. In contrast, where dual authorities exist, educational guidelines tend to be

⁽¹³⁾ Belgium (German-speaking Community), Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, the United Kingdom (Wales and Northern Ireland), Albania and Switzerland.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Austria, Romania, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England and Scotland), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway and Serbia.

lacking for settings with children under age 3. Where they do exist, they are set down in separate documents for younger and older children and issued by different authorities ⁽¹⁵⁾. In such cases, it is crucial to ensure that a coordinated approach is used across the two phases of ECEC.

Several countries have introduced educational guidelines for children under age 3 recently.

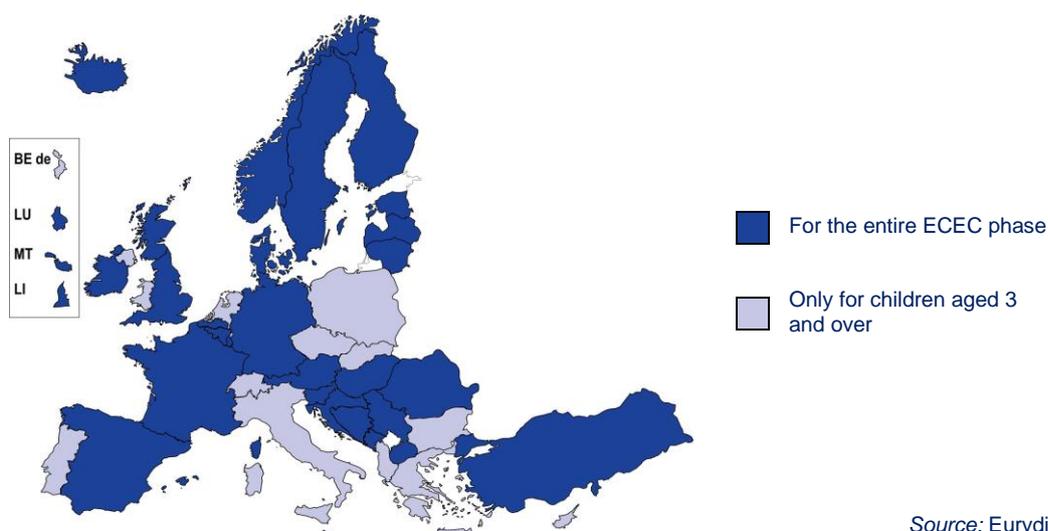
Increasingly, ECEC systems with dual authorities are introducing learning components in ECEC from the earliest age. Since the first edition of the Key Data on ECEC report (2012/13), educational guidelines have been introduced for ECEC settings with younger children in Belgium (Flemish Community), France, Luxembourg and Liechtenstein. In addition, Italy and Portugal are planning to introduce such guidelines in the near future.

Educational guidelines, where they exist, establish a set of areas for children's learning and development that should be the focus of daily activities. The learning areas highlighted in (almost) all countries which apply to the entire phase of ECEC are: emotional, personal and social development; physical development; artistic skills; language and communication skills; understanding of the world; cooperation skills; and health education. Other learning areas are less frequently mentioned and are more often targeted at older children. This is the case for instance with early foreign language learning and digital education.

Learning through play is widely emphasised.

Most of the countries that have top-level educational guidelines provide recommendations on pedagogical approaches and assessment methods. The pedagogical approaches recommended make substantial room for learning through play, and the key role of adults in encouraging children's thinking during play is often underlined. Finding the right balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities is stressed in most countries, while involving parents in children's learning is emphasised a little less often. All countries that provide guidelines on assessment refer to child observation, and in a majority, keeping written records of the results of observations is clearly mentioned. When they specify more detail on the form the observations should take, countries tend to favour continuous observation rather than regular short observations. Portfolios and self-assessment are less frequently recommended.

Figure 6: Top-level educational guidelines, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The Figure shows regulations for centre-based provision. For more information and country-specific notes, see Figure D1a in the full report. For home-based provision, see Figure D1c in the full report.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), France, Hungary, Liechtenstein and Turkey.

Degree of system and policy integration in ECEC across Europe

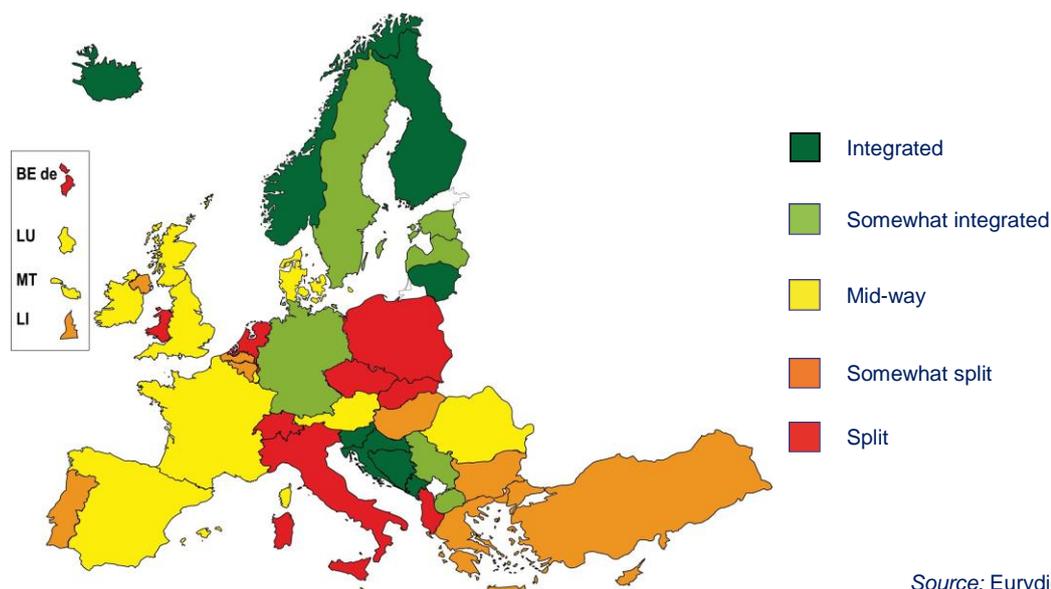
European countries can be placed on a continuum from integrated to split systems according to four criteria linked to the quality dimensions previously discussed: settings (unitary or separate), authorities (single or dual), highly qualified staff throughout the entire ECEC phase (minimum ISCED level 6) and education guidelines applying to all settings. Figure 7 shows the degree of system and policy coherence from integrated (dark green) to split (red).

Integrated (dark green): coordinated and consistent policies throughout the entire ECEC phase. This is the case in Croatia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Finland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro and Norway. In these countries, children attend a unitary setting until the start of primary education⁽¹⁶⁾. The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting rules and regulations for the entire phase of ECEC. The curriculum, educational programme or guidelines apply from an early age and core practitioners must be highly qualified across the entire phase of ECEC.

Somewhat integrated (light green): most or all children attend unitary settings. ECEC falls under a single ministry and educational guidelines are available for the entire phase of ECEC. However, with respect to the degree of system integration for settings and qualification requirements, this category has two sub-groups:

- countries where all children attend a single setting, but where there is no top-level requirement for staff to be highly qualified across the entire phase of ECEC (Latvia, Sweden, North Macedonia and Serbia).
- countries where some children make a transition from a setting for younger to a setting for older children (mixed setting system), but core practitioners are highly qualified across the entire ECEC phase (Germany and Estonia).

Figure 7: Degree of ECEC system integration, 2018/19



Children in Europe face quite different ECEC environments which lead to different early learning experiences.

Explanatory note

The Figure indicates the degree of integration according to whether the ECEC system has unitary settings, a single authority, highly qualified staff (at ISCED level 6) across the entire phase of ECEC, and educational guidelines applying to settings for both younger and older age groups. The breakdown by criteria is available in Annex A in the full report. Dark green = all four criteria; red = none of the criteria.

⁽¹⁶⁾ In Lithuania, Finland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, some children may already move to the same site as the primary school for the last year of ECEC (pre-primary class).

Mid-way (yellow): a single ministry is responsible and education guidelines apply across the entire phase of ECEC. However, some or all children need to change settings and highly qualified core practitioners (at ISCED level 6) are not employed across the entire phase. France is an exception. It is included in this category despite highly qualified core practitioners for the whole ECEC phase because provision for younger and older children is managed by different ministries.

Somewhat split (orange): in these countries, all children who start ECEC at a young age usually have to make the transition from a childcare-type setting to a pre-primary setting. Only one of the criteria applies across the whole phase. In Belgium (French and Flemish Communities), Hungary, Liechtenstein and Turkey, although educational guidelines are available for the entire ECEC phase, they are issued by different authorities for under- and over-3s, and core practitioners working with younger children do not have to be highly qualified. In contrast, in Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus and Portugal, educational guidelines are not available in settings for younger children, but core practitioners must be highly qualified across the entire ECEC phase.

Split (red): the typical split between childcare and early education is apparent in all areas: separate settings, different ministries responsible for younger and older children, higher qualification requirements for core practitioners in pre-primary education than in childcare settings for younger children (or lower level requirements in both phases), and no educational guidelines for younger children. Belgium (German-speaking Community), Czechia, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, the United Kingdom (Wales), Albania and Switzerland belong to this category. Italy is integrating its centre-based ECEC services for under- and over-3s. Staff qualifications will be aligned throughout the entire ECEC phase from 2019/20.

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.

This analysis of the degree of integration in ECEC suggests that children in Europe face quite different ECEC environments, which lead to different early learning experiences. Only children in the Nordic, Baltic and Balkan regions encounter a somewhat or fully integrated ECEC system where they attend a single setting governed by one ministry and where highly qualified staff encourage their learning and development from the earliest age. Children in most other European countries encounter changes as they move from childcare-type settings to education-focused pre-primary settings and the quality of ECEC provision varies. However, the traditional division between the childcare and pre-primary education phases is blurring with many countries introducing educational guidelines for younger children. Moreover, ECEC governance is becoming increasingly integrated under one ministry or top-level authority. Conversely, the setting structure and staff qualifications have not changed much over recent years in Europe.

Access and quality seem to be fairly well aligned. Most countries that assure a place guarantee from an early age are somewhat or fully integrated with respect to the four key quality dimensions: the structural organisation of ECEC, governance, staff qualification requirements and educational content⁽¹⁷⁾. In contrast, the split ECEC systems do not provide a place guarantee before ECEC becomes part of the education system (around age 3 or even later).

However, it is important to note that not all integrated ECEC systems guarantee an early access to ECEC. Some of them still struggle to guarantee access for every child and have low participation rates⁽¹⁸⁾.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden and Norway. However, not all integrated ECEC systems provide a place guarantee.

⁽¹⁸⁾ The ECEC participation rates for children under age 3 are approximately 20 % or less in Croatia, Lithuania, North Macedonia and Serbia. No Eurostat data for Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Montenegro.

EVALUATION OF ECEC SETTINGS: A WAY TO ENSURE QUALITY

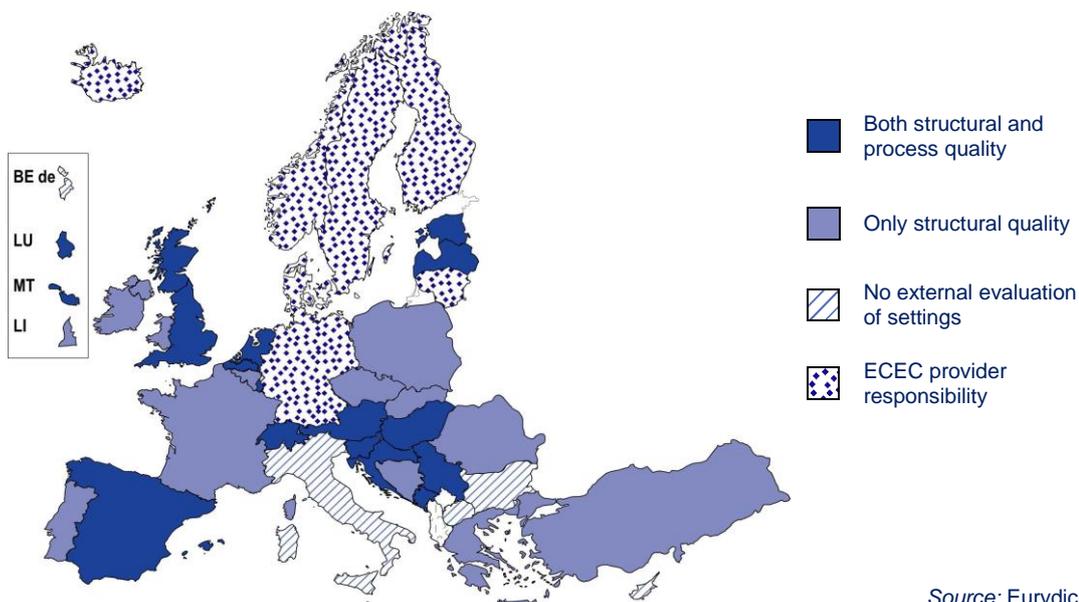
One of the means by which top-level authorities seek to improve quality in ECEC is through the evaluation of individual settings. Evaluation can cover many aspects of ECEC, however, the two main dimensions of quality often emphasised in the ECEC context are structural quality and process quality (European Commission, 2014; Slot et al., 2015).

- **Structural quality** refers to checking that settings are complying with the framework conditions for ECEC in areas such as health and safety, staff qualifications or group sizes. Structural quality can also include checking whether the pedagogical plan meets the standards set out in top-level educational guidelines.
- **Process quality** refers to how well the setting supports the learning process. The main areas evaluated are: how the curriculum is implemented (quality and variety of activities), the quality of interactions and relationships between staff and children – how practitioners encourage children's development – and how well children interact with each other.

Both structural and process quality is evaluated in only a minority of European countries.

The external evaluation of ECEC settings for older children often addresses both structural and process quality. In contrast, only a third of European education systems have established evaluation systems which check that settings for younger children not only comply with standards but also support the learning process (see Figure 8). Almost half of countries have either no provisions for the external evaluation of settings for children under age 3 or they evaluate only the structural quality.

Figure 8: Main focus of the external evaluation of centre-based ECEC settings for children under the age of 3, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

For more information and country-specific notes, see Figure E1a in the full report.

In Germany, Lithuania and the Nordic countries, the ECEC providers have the duty to evaluate the quality of their provision. These providers (local authorities/municipalities, NGOs or other private bodies) have a great deal of freedom in the approaches used.

Differences in the scope of external evaluation in ECEC settings are, in turn, often related to the type of body responsible for the external evaluation of settings. When an educational inspectorate or another ministerial department responsible for educational evaluation at higher levels of education (such as primary education) carries out the external evaluation of ECEC settings, attention is usually paid to how well the setting supports the learning process (process quality). However, when the external evaluation of settings is assured by public bodies dealing with family, social affairs or youth, which are not responsible for evaluating schools at higher levels of education, it is more often focused on compliance with norms and standards (structural quality).

Children's voices are rarely heard during the evaluation process.

The evaluation of centre-based ECEC settings allows for the child's perspective to be taken into account. Gathering the views of children on their daily activities or on their interactions with peers and practitioners is an effective way to ensure that the interests of the child are at the centre of the evaluation and improvement process. The Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems⁽¹⁹⁾ stresses the importance of giving children the opportunity to contribute to the evaluation process. Currently, participatory evaluation procedures that allow children to be heard only apply in 12 countries across Europe. However, only a few education systems have established that the views of both younger and older children must be considered during this process⁽²⁰⁾.

SUPPORTING TRANSITION TO PRIMARY EDUCATION

In Europe, most children start primary education around age 6.

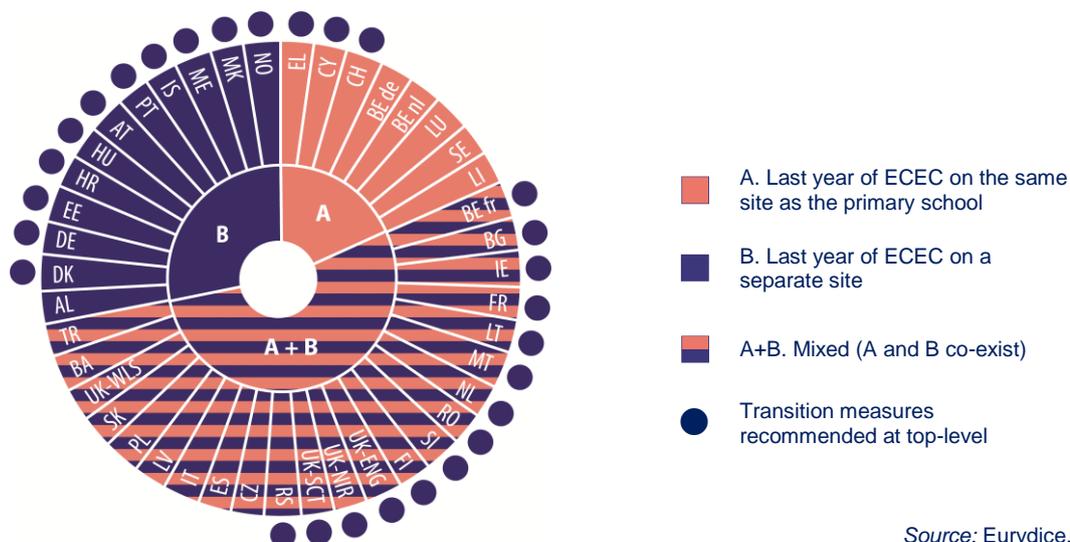
While the trend is towards integration and continuity throughout the whole ECEC phase, the end of the phase brings important changes for children. They generally move on to primary education at around age 6 in the majority of European countries, but it may be as early as age 4 or as late as age 7. During this transition period, children and their parents may experience difficulties due to the differences in the new environment. Primary schools often have different educational approaches, rules, daily timetables, and expectations. Children must also build new relationships with staff and peers (Balduzzi et al., 2019). It is therefore important to prepare children and their families for this transition and so mitigate any difficulties that arise.

Attending a setting on the same site as the primary school during the last year of ECEC not only ensures that children are already familiar with the physical and social environment, but also offers opportunities for collaboration between ECEC and school staff. In eight education systems, all children attend the last year of ECEC on the same site as the primary school (see Figure 9). In the majority of the education systems, some children move to the site of the primary school at least one year before the start of primary education.

⁽¹⁹⁾ OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4-14.

⁽²⁰⁾ Denmark, Spain (two Autonomous Communities: Cataluña and Comunidad Valenciana), Finland, Sweden, the United Kingdom (Scotland), Iceland and Norway.

Figure 9: Top-level measures to facilitate children's transition to primary education and location of the last year of ECEC, 2018/19



Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

The Figure does not take into account ECEC groups organised in primary schools in less populated areas. For more information and country-specific notes, see Figures D9 and D10 in the full report.

Whether a physical move for children is involved or not, a range of measures can be implemented at the ECEC setting level to establish continuity and cooperation with primary schools in order to promote a smooth transition. Two thirds of education systems recommend settings or local authorities to establish practices that facilitate the transition. The measures involve children, staff as well as parents. Helping children become familiar with the new environment can be achieved by organising visits to the primary school or by running joint projects involving children in both the ECEC setting and the primary school. The recommended collaborative practices between ECEC and primary school staff to facilitate the transition also include passing on information on a child's achievements, becoming familiar with each other's environment, coordinating continuing professional development activities or cooperating in the curriculum development for both education levels. Meetings with parents are often recommended to familiarise them with the new environment and provide information on how the school works.

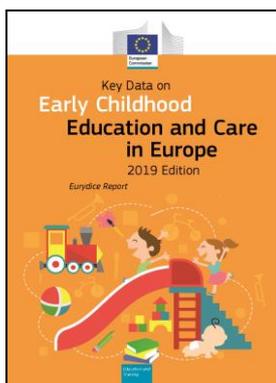
The measures and initiatives implemented by ECEC settings are not always enough to ensure a smooth transition to primary education. The primary school therefore has an essential role in supporting this process. Some experts and policy-makers have been advocating a paradigm shift from making children ready for school to making schools ready for children (OECD, 2017). However, a number of European countries have policies based on the idea that a child is required to have attained a certain level of emotional, social, cognitive and physical development in order to be ready to start primary education. Readiness for school is an admission criteria for primary education in a third of education systems⁽²¹⁾, mostly in central Europe and the Balkans. In these education systems, either ECEC or primary school staff may be responsible for deciding whether a child is mature enough to cope with the next step. A decision is often made on the basis of an assessment and/or observation of the child's development, with specialists sometimes being consulted. In the remaining countries, the concept of school readiness is less or not at all important since reaching the official age is the only condition for admission to primary education.

One third of European education systems do not provide guidance to facilitate the transition from ECEC to primary education.

A child is required to have attained a certain level of emotional, social, cognitive and physical development in order to start primary education in a third of European countries.

⁽²¹⁾ Belgium (German-speaking and Flemish Communities), Germany, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Austria, Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and Serbia.

MORE EURYDICE INFORMATION ON ECEC



This brief highlighted some of the main findings of the Eurydice report on *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition*. The full report provides many other detailed comparative analyses as well as national sheets with the key country information. The pdf version is available online at:

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-%E2%80%93-2019-edition_en



Yearly data on six key elements of ECEC systems dating back to the 2014/15 school year is available through the Eurydice project on *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe*. All data is available online at:

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/structural-indicators-monitoring-education-and-training-systems-europe---2018_en



More detailed information by country is available on Eurydice website, in the descriptions of national education systems:

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en

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