



TOWARDS HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE

Policy recommendations



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WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE MATTERS

The early years are critical for laying the foundation for both immediate well-being and future success. Quality early childhood education programmes support the development of essential social-emotional resilience, cognitive abilities, and positive behaviour patterns while fostering a child's sense of self and agency. By nurturing skills across literacy, numeracy, science, and socio-emotional development, these programmes address the holistic needs of young learners.

THE CHALLENGE

While 93% of EU children aged 3 to compulsory school age attend early childhood education and care (ECEC),¹ the challenge remains in addressing quality provision.² High-quality services are essential for generating benefits, while low-quality programmes can adversely affect both children and society.

THE GOAL

The European Commission targets at least 96% ECEC participation by 2030,³ while the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 (Target 4.2) aims to ensure all children have access to quality early childhood development and care.

BRIDGING DIVERSITY TOWARDS QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN EUROPE

Europe's early childhood education and care (ECEC) landscape is highly diverse. Provision may be centre- or home-based, delivered publicly or privately, and aimed at children from birth or from the age of three. Some systems emphasise play-based, child-led exploration, while others focus more heavily on structured, academic preparation. The professionals who deliver care and education also vary, ranging from pedagogues trained in child development to teachers with more formal instructional training.

This diversity is a strength, but it also creates disparities in quality. Without a shared framework for what constitutes high-quality provision, inequalities persist, especially among vulnerable populations. SCIREARLY was established to respond to this challenge. By mapping the current landscape, identifying common quality indicators, and engaging children, families, and schools in a co-creation process, SCIREARLY aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with a clear roadmap for building excellence and equity into Europe's ECEC systems.

[1] European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice (2025). Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[2] Council of the European Union. (2019). Council recommendation of 22 May 2019 on high-quality early childhood education and care systems.

[3] European Union (2024). Education and Training Monitor 2024.

KEY ELEMENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

A roadmap for policy makers

What key elements should a science-informed early childhood education and care policy promote? Based on SCIREARLY's research and co-creation with children, families, and schools, we identify six elements that are both scientifically supported and reflect the lived experiences of those the policy aims to benefit.

Whole child development through a nurturing and responsive learning environment

Foster an environment where emotional safety, empathy, friendships, and positive relationships and dialogic interactions thrive, ensuring children's agency is protected and that they feel listened to, valued, and supported in their learning journey.

Shared and dialogic activities between schools and families

Encourage shared and dialogic activities such as storytelling and dialogic reading between children, teachers, and their families, promoting curiosity, active listening, and shared thinking. Peer work that enables opportunities for mutual support and autonomy from the teacher is also found to be crucial.

Investment in a thriving early years education workforce

Invest in educators' ongoing training, empowering them with tools and strategies to deliver high-quality education and care while maintaining personal well-being.

Rich, purposeful and stimulating learning space

Create stimulating, accessible spaces rich in sensory, cognitive, social, and creative resources that invite exploration and foster children's independent and collaborative learning.

Focus on building blocks of learning for well-being and success

Develop children's essential skills, creativity, and physical and socio-emotional development through dialogic-based actions, learning-in-context, and playful approaches. Digital skills are also important, supported by thoughtful and intentional use of technology in the classroom.

Pathways for inclusive involvement and decision-making

Involve families, educators, and community members in collaborative and egalitarian decision-making, ensuring diverse voices shape policies that reflect equity and inclusivity.

"Science and mathematics are subjects that you cannot exclude from the knowledge process, however, they must be age-appropriate for children. For example, [at my son's pre-school] they went through the entire life cycle of the butterfly ... the life cycle of the bee. Discovery, exploration, observation of the world around us."
(Parent, Italy)

"Sometimes, children who say 'I don't know' set a larger goal than what you are actually asking. It's about helping them to understand that you are only asking for something small, and see, they do know how to do it. Supporting learning, for me, is not about giving the solution right away but breaking down the problem step by step into what they need to do to reach the goal."
(Teacher, Spain)

CONCLUSION: A MULTILEVEL APPROACH

High-quality early childhood education and care depends on integrating these six elements across three interconnected levels.

At the **immediate** environment level, nurturing interactions, purposeful learning contexts, and stimulating spaces enable children to thrive.

At the **community** level, meaningful family and community involvement in shared activities strengthens children's development and school capacity.

At the **structural** level, investment in the early years workforce and inclusive decision-making pathways ensures that all stakeholders are supported and have a voice.

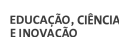
This integrated approach ensures that policy not only promotes scientifically grounded practices but also reflects the lived experiences of children, families, and educators.



LEARN MORE

This document is an abbreviated version of a policy brief based on the SCIREARLY project's research mapping early childhood education and care provision across Europe, developed through co-creation with children, families, and schools.

The full policy brief can be found on the SCIREARLY IMPACT Platform: www.scirearly.eu



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