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# Provision of **quality early childcare services**

**SYNTHESIS REPORT**

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# Provision of quality early childcare services

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## SYNTHESIS REPORT

**European Commission**

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## Executive Summary

Childcare systems involve labour market, parental leave and childcare policies. It is clear that some countries, including the Czech Republic, fall far behind recommended targets for childcare provision. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has two major functions: to help parents' participation in the labour market, and to foster children's development. Governments frequently make the mistake of focussing on one only of these functions, and it is negligent for a government to ignore that ECEC will inevitably influence both parental employment and children's development.

Societies are changing, and the demand for skills will increase, and required skills will change so an adaptable workforce is important. A country's future depends on how it treats children. It is almost always cheaper, more effective, and more sustainable to prevent problems rather than to try and cure them later, and preschool experience is critical for adult skills.

The most effective approach to ECEC is high-quality universal services, with additional individual support for those in need. Good quality, affordable ECEC helps the reconciliation of work and family life and thus fosters parental labour market participation and gender equality. Improving childcare may also improve declining fertility rates, by lowering the cost of childbearing in terms of employment and career opportunities. The use of childcare will be affected by parental leave and the availability, cost, and quality of care. Very long parental leave appears to lead to lower use of childcare in a number of countries.

Children's daily experiences drive child development, and these daily experiences constitute the quality of care. Overall, high-quality childcare has been associated with benefits for children's development, with the strongest effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evidence on preschool years (over three years) is fairly consistent, but the evidence for birth to three years is equivocal with some studies finding negative effects, some no effects and some positive effects associated with childcare. Discrepant results relate partly to age of starting and partly to quality of childcare. Also childcare effects vary by family background and negative, neutral and positive effects may occur depending on the relative balance of quality of care at home and in childcare. Effects may relate to both quantity and quality of childcare, but effect sizes for childcare are about half that for family factors. Stable care with staff that has good training contributes substantially to good quality care.

As indicated in the EU (2013) recommendation on investing in children, investing in high-quality ECEC is an effective evidence-based policy tool, although it is not a panacea. However, the level of ECEC provision is very unequal across the EU, and to be effective, it needs to be of high quality. The Czech Republic is planning policy changes to expand its childcare system.

As early child development is the foundation for later educational, social and occupational success, there are likely to be longer-term consequences. Such changes may well affect longer-term EU-2020 goals through improving children's outcomes including reducing early school-leaving and improving access to higher education, which in turn may lead to overall poverty reduction, and enhanced social inclusion, resulting from improved employment amongst the population.

## A. Policy and research on early childcare in a European context

Childcare systems involve labour market, parental leave and childcare policies. It is clear that some countries, including the Czech Republic, fall far behind other European countries, particularly those that are economically most successful, in childcare use. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has two major functions: to help parents' participation in the labour market, and to foster children's development. Governments frequently make the mistake of focussing on one only of these functions, and it is negligent for a government to ignore that ECEC will inevitably influence both parental employment and children's development. These issues relate to the EU (2013) recommendation on Investing in Children.

Societies are changing, and the demand for skills will increase, and required skills will change so an adaptable workforce is important. Preschool experience is critical for adult skills; to quote Heckman & Wax, (2004), "Like it or not, the most important mental and behavioural patterns, once established, are difficult to change once children enter school". Also ECEC influences social inequalities, "Widening access to pre-primary education (ECEC) can improve both overall performance and equity by reducing socio-economic disparities among students, if extending coverage does not compromise quality" (OECD, 2010). We should consider ECEC from a social pedagogical perspective, where the main policy rationale is the contribution to child development and socioeconomic integration of socially excluded groups.

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The importance of ECEC services has been recognised at the EU level, and the Barcelona Summit of 2002 produced explicit conclusions and targets for the provision of childcare services. Also the European Council agreed that Member States should remove disincentives to female participation in the labour market and strive to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age. These targets have been reaffirmed as recently as 2008 in the employment guidelines (2008-10) adopted by the European Council.

In 2013, the European Commission issued a Recommendation on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Its first pillar was about giving parents access to resources. The second was about access to quality services, such as early childcare, health and housing. The Recommendation makes a strong plea to invest in early childhood education and care (ECEC). In 2014, the European Commission provided a quality framework with provisions on access, professionally trained staff, child-staff ratios, curriculum, monitoring and inspection ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)). Cooperation amongst stakeholders, including full involvement of parents is essential.

### Childcare, forms and use; parental leave; parents' participation in the labour market

It is common to distinguish between childcare for children under 3 years old and preschool children (from 3 years until compulsory school age), reflecting differing developmental





needs. Childcare may be formal and recognised officially, or informal and unregistered; in group or individual settings. Most formal childcare is group care (plus regulated child-minders) whereas informal care is mostly individual care. The distinction of formal versus informal care is administrative, but for the child the group versus individual distinction is more important.

## Formal childcare

The Barcelona Summit in 2002 set targets for provision of childcare in EU Member States (European Commission. 2013a). For children under 3 years, Mills et al. (2013) report that the 33 % target was met in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Belgium, Luxembourg and the UK. In some countries, such as Denmark, and Poland, there is a predominantly full-time use (30 or more hours per week), whereas in the Netherlands, the UK and the Czech Republic, parents mostly use childcare part-time (under 30 hours per week). For children from age 3 to school age, Mills et al. (2013) report that the target of 90 % was met in 11 Member States.

Part-time childcare helps parents into part-time employment, which appeals to many mothers, but may not help parents to enter full-time employment. Even part-time employment may require extended care on specific days. Hence participation rates do not fully indicate whether childcare demand is met. The Eurydice (2009) report shows that, in most EU countries, settings provide extensive hours fitting working parents' needs, but often only for older children, and often only part-time provision is subsidised. This reflects the perspective that childcare is for benefitting children and parental employment needs are neglected. However low participation in formal childcare may not reflect a shortage of childcare as parents use multiple strategies, including a mix of formal, informal and grandparent care.

Availability of formal childcare is only one factor determining parental employment. Other factors include cultural norms, affordability, flexibility and quality of childcare. OECD analyses (2011) show that, in most EU States, childcare cost is high but is usually offset by subsidies. However, parents regard childcare cost as a major issue, and Mills et al. (2013) report the main reason for parents not working is childcare cost. Overall, 53 % of parents report that they are not working full-time because childcare is too expensive, 25 % mention lack of childcare availability and only 4 % mention quality of childcare.

## Informal childcare

Informal childcare includes grandparents, relatives, friends, neighbours, unregistered child-minders, nannies and au-pairs, with grandparents being the most common providers. Sometimes informal childcare is used in combination with formal childcare; e.g. in the UK, often children are in formal childcare in the morning and with a child-minder later until parents return from work. In half of EU countries informal childcare use exceeds the 33 % target for under threes, typically for less than 30 hours per week. Mills et al. (2013) report most children younger than 3 in the Netherlands, Greece, Portugal, Romania and Cyprus use informal care, while in Norway, Sweden and Finland, few children are in informal childcare.

With little formal childcare, it is generally only possible for mothers to work if grandparents provide childcare (Herlofson & Hagestad 2012). Aassve et al. (2012) found that mothers'



decisions to work depend on grandparent childcare in Hungary, Bulgaria, France and Germany, but not in the Netherlands, Russia and Georgia.

Grandparents, as the only option, limits parents living far from their own parents. Disadvantaged families more often use grandparent care. Jappens and Van Bavel (2012) found that in Northern and Western Europe, the frequency of grandparents living with grandchildren was less than 15 %, while in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, and Ireland it was over 47 % of cases. Inevitably such co-residence influences childcare and mothers in Hungary, Greece, Italy, and parts of Austria and Spain are most likely to use grandparent care, whereas mothers in Denmark, France, Iceland and Sweden are least likely to use grandparent care. Informal childcare helps mothers into the labour market, facilitates intergenerational relationships, builds social capital and provides family support.

## Parental leave

Maternity leave is typically provided for the health of the mother and newborn child, and occurs just before, during and following childbirth. Paternity leave is typically taken soon after the birth, to enable a father to spend time supporting his family. Parental leave is for both parents to give parents more time with a young child. Often it is taken at the end of maternity leave. Parental leave may be either non-transferable but available to both parents, or transferable between parents, or be available for parents to use as they wish. All EU countries have maternity leave after childbirth, varying from 1.8 months in Germany and Austria to 12 months in Poland and the UK. Paternity leave varies, typically two weeks or less, but is longer in Scandinavia.

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Mostly mothers take parental leave, often as an alternative to childcare. In the Czech Republic, women receive 28 weeks of maternity leave with compensation of 69 % of salary and up to 4 years of parental leave. Also in Hungary parental leave is up to 2 years, and in such countries Robila (2011) suggests that parental leave compensates for little subsidised childcare.

The financial compensation with parental leave affects uptake. When compensation is high, fathers' use is higher, but still lower than mothers' use. In Denmark, where financial compensation is high, 24 % of fathers took parental leave in 2005, typically for 8 weeks, while 94 % of mothers took parental leave, typically for 28 weeks. Sometimes countries restrict part of the leave to fathers. In Germany in 2007, such a reform worked, raising father leave from 3 % in 2006 to 28 % in 2011.

In some countries, after parental leave parents may receive a childcare allowance to care for their own child or to use non-family childcare. This allowance is usually at a flat rate and is lower than the average wage. This approach can be seen as consolidating mothers' role as the main carer, strengthening social class differences and the informal care market. This strategy was introduced in Germany in 2013, where parents who do use childcare, whether employed or not, receive 150 EUR for a child aged 15 to 36 months. This was justified as allowing freedom of choice. While freedom of choice is to be applauded, some argue that it would be better to increase childcare, and that the subsidy conveys a particular ideology regarding family roles, discouraging mothers with a migrant background from entering the labour market (Boll & Reich 2012).



## Parental labour force participation

Overall parenthood reduces employment for women, while for men parenthood increases employment. Only in Denmark and Slovenia is parenthood associated with a small increase in employment for women. Elsewhere parenthood decreases women's employment. This effect is greatest in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, with little effect for men.

Flexible employment helps parents, particularly mothers, to combine parenthood with employment. Parents may reduce working hours when their children are young, and this happens more for mothers. Part-time employment helps with combining parenthood and employment. Over 3 million Europeans aged 15 to 34 switched from full-time to part-time employment because of childcare or family issues (Eurofound 2013). More mothers work part-time than childless women in half of EU countries. In the more affluent nations such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and the UK, most mothers with young children work part-time. However in Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Romania, there is little difference in hours of work for women with and without children. It appears that in richer countries you see high rates of part time work, while in poorer countries part time work for women, and maternal employment is low. Full-time working increases as children get older, and with fewer children. Mothers frequently change to part-time work, returning to full-time when their child is older, and this is clear in the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway. Such effects are stronger for lone parents. Often mothers move voluntarily to part-time employment due to familial responsibilities.

## Factors affecting parental labour force participation

Childcare cost is important, particularly for low-income families. Mothers may be better off not working and caring for children themselves. For instance, in Ireland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic the high cost of childcare affects childcare use, and parents often move to part-time work or leave employment.

Parental leave affects childcare use. In the UK extending parental leave from 5 to 12 months after childbirth reduced demand for childcare for the child's first year. Similar effects occurred in Nordic countries. After the first birthday childcare use steadily increases, reaching a plateau around the time the child is three, when almost all children are using childcare. Most parents will take parental leave and not use childcare when paid leave is available. In the UK and Nordic countries the few parents using childcare and foregoing full parental leave are typically in high status occupations where longer leave may harm future careers. Also very long parental leave appears to lead to lower use of childcare in Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and, to a lesser extent, in Germany.

Availability, accessibility and quality of care are also important. Difficulties related to opening hours or lack of capacity seem relevant for parents in Hungary, France, Greece, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic. Quality issues are noted particularly in Greece, Slovenia, Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Poland and Italy.

## Evidence on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children 0-3 years and effects upon children's development

High-quality childcare has been associated with benefits for children's development, with the strongest effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is also evidence that sometimes negative effects can occur, and this seems to be linked to high numbers of hours of poor quality group care, particularly in the first year of life. The results of studies partly depend upon the ECEC context, but there is commonality across countries indicating many results are not culture-specific.

While evidence on preschool years (over three years) is fairly consistent, the evidence for birth to three years is equivocal with some studies finding negative effects, some no effects and some positive effects associated with childcare. Discrepant results relate partly to age of starting and partly to quality of childcare. Also childcare effects vary by family background and negative, neutral and positive effects may occur depending on the relative balance of quality of care at home and in childcare. Effects may relate to both quantity and quality of childcare, but effect sizes for childcare are about half that for family factors. A comprehensive review of research in this area is available by Melhuish et al. (2015).

### Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children 0-3 years

An EPIC report (Guerin 2014) reached the following conclusions:

- In the context of economic uncertainty, investing in high-quality ECEC appears to be an effective evidence-based social policy tool, although it should not be considered a panacea.
- The level of ECEC provision is very unequal across the EU: and to be effective, it needs to be of high quality.
- One way to break the cycle of disadvantage would be to develop ambitious indicators and policy goals, that link ECEC provision for underrepresented groups to access to higher education.

Children's daily experiences drive child development. To optimise a child's experience, several factors may improve the quality of ECEC. Aggregating evidence indicates that the following quality characteristics enhance development:

- Adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available;
- Well-trained staff who are committed to their work with children;
- A developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content;
- Ratios and group sizes that allow staff to interact appropriately with children;
- Supervision that maintains consistency in the quality of care;
- Staff development that ensures continuity, stability and improving quality;
- Facilities that are safe and sanitary and accessible to parents;
- Staff providing support for parents to provide early learning in the home.



ECEC can improve both through structural features and support for teachers to assure that children's experiences are stimulating and adapted to children's developmental level. In-service professional development and pre-service education are important for quality and more research and development is needed here.

For disadvantaged families, high quality ECEC in the first three years can produce benefits for emotional, cognitive, language and social development. Low-quality childcare produces either no benefit or negative effects. For early intervention, high-quality childcare paired with parental support can be effective.

For the general population high-quality ECEC benefits children's cognitive, language and social development, but low-quality childcare can be a risk factor and may lead to a dual risk for disadvantaged children potentially linked to deficits in language or cognitive development. Some evidence indicated that high levels of childcare, particularly group care in the first two years, may elevate the risk for antisocial behaviour. However subsequent research indicates that this may be related to high levels of poor quality care, particularly in childcare centres in the first year. The low level of much ECEC quality is of concern; greater benefits could be gained by improving the quality of these programmes.

### **Individual versus group care 0-3 years**

Reviews conclude that differences in effects of centre-based and home-based care settings may be due to differences in quality (Anders, 2013; Melhuish, 2004b). This has recently been confirmed in the US (Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort) (Ruzek et al., 2014). Differences between individual and group care resolve to differences in quality. As children get older centre-based care becomes more adapted to the developing needs of the child. The Eurofound (2015) study found that continuing professional development improves outcomes for children and making services more inclusive. Training on inclusion also helps.

To conclude, although evidence is limited, there are indications that younger children having childcare develop optimally within smaller and more intimate non-parental settings, with fewer peers and greater adult-child ratios than centre-based programmes (Dowsett et al., 2008). Some findings have shown that home-based care can be of good quality (e.g., Melhuish & Otero, 2015). Yet, carers in home-based settings may not receive peer support or professional training as in centre-based care. They are fairly isolated, and with low pay, which can leave them feeling undervalued. Home-based care can be high quality especially if closely monitored, but we do not know enough about how such settings relate to children's development, and how to support them.

### **Quality, caregiver-child interactions and curriculum 0-3 years**

Interactional experience is part of process quality, i.e., the child's daily immediate experiences. In the first three years language development and socio-emotional development are critical aspects of development, and are strongly influenced by children's interactional experience. Interactions drive development. This affects language development in the home and in childcare (Melhuish, Lloyd, Martin, & Mooney, 1990; Melhuish, Martin, & Mooney, 1991; Hart & Risley, 1995). Higher communication and responsiveness links to higher language development at 18 months (Melhuish, Lloyd, Martin, & Mooney, 1990), three years of age (Melhuish, Martin, & Mooney, 1991) and effects persist (Melhuish, 2001).

Children in the first three years need predictable activities and routine care, via a balanced curriculum (Dalli et al., 2011; Melhuish, 2004a). Little systematic evidence concerns how pedagogical strategies can ensure healthy all-round development (Downer, Sabol, & Hamre, 2010). Recent research is now progressing to fill these gaps (e.g., Siraj, Kingston & Melhuish, 2015). Young children need warm reliable adult support, and sensitive and responsive interaction attuned to temperamental and age characteristics (Dalli & Rockel, 2012; Trevarthen et al., 2003).

## Stability of care and physical environment

Reviews name continuity and stability of care arrangements as core factors contributing to good quality care. Unfortunately, stability in ECEC settings is often unavailable (Dalli et al., 2011; Whitebook et al., 2009). Staff retention and staff turnover, changes in arrangements, staff working hours and attendance patterns all affect the continuity of relationships. Case studies show that particularly effective centres had long serving staff (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gildea, & Bell, 2002). Montie et al., (2006) reported that staff experience was related to children's cognitive and language development. Lower staff turnover rates are associated with higher process quality (Goelman et al., 2006; Melhuish et al., 1990). High quality appears impossible without stable caregivers.

Environments need to be calm, quiet, and not over-stimulated and allow for uninterrupted sleep, for comfort and feeding. Furthermore, they need to offer an environment rich in things to explore, and facilitate a range of activities including physical movement, dance, storytelling, drawing and painting. This may be particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, because ECEC settings can offer children access to learning materials and experiences not provided in their homes (Dearing, McCartney & Taylor, 2009). Spatial organisation and grouping can be important. Skalicka, Belsky, Stenseng, and Wichstrøm (2015) tested whether the new open-group Norwegian day-care centres would affect child social behaviour differently to traditionally organised centres. Children from open-group centres experienced less teacher-child closeness, and more teacher-child conflict and problem behaviour later, suggesting that open-group centres are not optimal.

## Adult-child ratio, group size and professional development

Adult-child ratios relate to group size and are to be considered with structural variables, such as staff training, and organisational characteristics. More favourable adult-child ratios (fewer children per practitioner) provide higher quality adult-child interaction (Dalli et al., 2011; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). In the USA, across all non-maternal settings, more favourable adult:child ratios and group sizes were the best predictors of positive infant caregiving (NICHD Early Childcare Research Network, 2000a). It is argued that the impact of adult-child ratios and group sizes is greater for younger children (Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009; Huntsman, 2008).

The optimum recommended ratios for under twos in ECEC is relatively consistently stated as 1:3 (Dalli & Rockel, 2012; Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care, 2009); for two to three year-olds, recommendations 1:4 or 1:5, and for three to five year-olds, recommendations are between 1:10 and 1:17. Ideal group sizes for under two year-olds are recommended to be six to eight children, and for two to three year-olds,



ten to 12; three year-olds, 14 to 18, and for four to five year-olds, 20 to 24 (Dalli & Rockel, 2012; Munton et al., 2002).

Staff qualifications partly predict higher quality and better child outcomes for children (Mathers et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Professional development is associated with better quality childcare by child-minders (Melhuish & Otero, 2015) and in group care (Melhuish, Gardiner & Otero, 2015). Considering the development of ECEC services in the UK in the last 15 years, comparing data for childcare centres in 2000 and 2015 is helpful. Qualifications increased substantially from 2000 to 2015. Observations indicate a parallel increase in quality, suggesting that increasing staff qualifications may lead to better quality of care.



## B. Policy in the Czech Republic

### Czech policy and its context

The Czech Republic has a low fertility rate (1.46 in 2013). Traditional families have become less common with 60 % of children born outside marriage, and every second marriage ends in divorce. Maternity leave is 28 weeks on 69 % of the previous net wage. Parental leave is from 18 to 42 months, with payments ranging up to sums that are 10 % higher than the Czech average wage. There is extremely low labour market participation by women with a child under 6 years. Part-time or flexible work is not common, and access to childcare is among the lowest in the EU. In 2014, one in three applications for public childcare was rejected. The gender pay gap is very high: 22 % as against an EU average of 16.5 %.

In March 2015, the Commission for Family Policy, a Ministerial Expert Commission, was established to prepare a long-term strategy for family policy, promoting freedom of choice in family life and values. The strategy, expected in the spring of 2016, will set out concrete measures in three main areas: services, financial support and employment. The strategy will respond to three trends: many families cannot afford more than one child; women university graduates (the majority) often decide not to found a family due to the poor conditions for reconciling family life and work; ageing policy is becoming vital in family policy to strengthen solidarity among generations. Family policy, gender equality and the employment of women are now seen as three interconnected policy areas.

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#### New family policy measures are:

- A new type of childcare service – children’s groups, which differs from existing kindergartens. Children’s groups provide day-care for between 12 and 24 children aged 1-6. Any individual or legal entity can set up a children’s group provided that the required quality standards are met.
- A birth grant for the second child.
- Funds for family policy to provide support for NGOs and municipalities.

Measures in preparation include:

- A legal entitlement to a kindergarten place at age 3 (from 2018 onwards).
- A new social housing law, which will provide support for young families.
- Increased tax credits for the second and third child.
- More flexible parental leave, allowance rates to be higher if leave is shorter.
- Leave of 3-6 months to care for seriously ill relatives. Job security will be safeguarded, and income compensation will be provided.
- Paternity leave of about 1 week in the first six weeks of the baby’s life.





Activities supported by the European Social Fund are:

- Micro-nurseries (from January 2016) for children 6 months to 4 years, with up to 4 children per carer, operating as a European-backed pilot project.
- A gender pay gap project aimed at achieving systemic change.
- Financial support for the establishment and running of children's groups.

## Evolving policy

The Czech Republic has a history of a split model of ECEC. From the 1940s kindergartens were childcare institutions for preschool children age 3, under the Ministry of Education, whereas nurseries were for children up to the age of 3, under the Ministry of Health. Hence nurseries employed medical nurses and doctors rather than pedagogically trained carers. Post-1989, kindergartens were maintained, but nurseries practically disappeared.

Besides helping to tackle poverty and gender inequalities, good-quality childcare can promote children's well-being and development, promote the inclusion of disadvantaged children, decrease early school leaving and improve school performance. Later interventions are more expensive and less effective. The Czech and Slovak Republics provide the lowest childcare access in the EU for the under-3s. For children aged 3-5, Czech provision is below the European average. Employment amongst Czech mothers is one of the lowest in Europe. Reforms are proposed to stimulate greater sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers. The new system would be insurance-based, so that families do not lose much money if the higher-earning partner takes parental leave. There may be non-transferable equal portions of paid leave for each parent, without disadvantaging single-parent families.

Since 2000, existing kindergartens have begun systemic restructuring. They are now required to develop educational programmes, with competences, goals or skills to be attained, in line with the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education from the Minister of Education. Implementation is regularly audited by the School Inspectorate, but this is often limited to a formal inspection, without supervision.

Kindergartens should cultivate children's abilities and skills while respecting their individuality. But with up to 28 children per group, and just two teachers working only partly overlapping shifts, attention to children's individual needs is scarcely possible. So the inclusion of children with special needs and from disadvantaged backgrounds is often neglected in kindergartens. To improve the inclusion of these groups, the Ministry of Education plans to introduce one compulsory year of preschool education. The Expert Commission also recommends improvements to kindergartens, notably staff-child ratios, staff training and staff qualified to promote the inclusion of disadvantaged children.

The government has also introduced legislation to facilitate children's groups for children from the age of 1 up to school age, given the shortage of childcare. Some critics say that children in children's groups will be at a disadvantage in relation to those in kindergartens. In 2015, legislation was amended to withdraw minimum standards for all providers to allow rapid expansion of children's groups, but in the meantime it has been proposed to re-introduce minimum standards for childcare to maintain quality. The government also plans to introduce non-profit micro-nurseries. There have been some fiscal measures to support childcare provision.

On the basis of international research, the Expert Commission recommends greater integration between education and care, as split models often produce less continuity in children's lives and lower-quality services for the younger due to lower staff qualifications, the lack of a curriculum and higher staff turnover. Childcare services free at the point of delivery have higher enrolment than those with a fee, so free services can help close enrolment gaps between different social and ethnic groups.

In most countries, the lowest-income families use childcare and education services less than others. The Expert Commission therefore recommends a guaranteed ECEC place for every child and to combine this with low or no fees. Income-related fees are one possibility.

Experience in Europe does not provide any evidence that quality would increase due to competition. For-profit provision may be associated with a decrease in quality, as a profit-orientation may reduce investment in quality. Quality may be difficult for parents to detect. Better information for parents, for example through quality ratings, may help to overcome this problem, but may increase social segregation. Price and quality regulations for all providers are therefore needed. To improve access to quality childcare, states must invest sufficient resources. The EU Childcare Network recommends that at least 1 % of GDP should be spent on ECEC. Current Czech expenditure is far below this, and the EU average. However, the present government intends to increase funding. There is a need to set quality standards and regulations for all providers, aimed at achieving an integrated care model. Kindergartens should be transformed, so that children younger than 3 can attend and benefit from greater continuity. Czech kindergartens can take children from the age of 2, but due to the lack of places and the child-staff ratios this does not generally happen.

## Internal review of policy

The Commission for Family Policy has recommended that the Czech Republic should:

- aim towards inclusive and local needs-responsive kindergartens;
- increase continuity in ECEC by providing early education in transformed kindergartens to children younger than 3 years;
- set regulations and minimum standards for all providers;
- use research-based evidence in order to improve quality;
- aim towards an integrated education-care model of ECEC;
- allow universal access or low fees combined with income-related fees;
- guarantee a place for all preschool children from a particular age;
- invest in ECEC to avoid trade-offs between quality and quantity.



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One European influence on the Czech Republic's rapidly evolving family policy has been a **project on Reconciliation of work and family inspired by European best practices** (2012-2015). This ESF-backed project has made a detailed comparison of the Czech, Austrian and German experiences. Its recommendations include:

- Local, financially accessible childcare services available from the end of maternity leave (about 28 weeks).
- Tax reductions for employed parents rather than direct social allowances.
- Motivating employers to offer flexible employment to benefit both parties. In the Czech Republic, flexible working hours, on a full-time contract, have proved more popular on both sides than part-time working. Homeworking offers possibilities for the future, but is not separately regulated in the Czech Republic, Austria or Germany. It tends to be governed by an extra clause in standard contracts, and in any case not feasible in a wide range of occupations.
- Financial measures for the employer – special tax reductions for part-time or flexible employment contracts.
- Consultancy services for parents and cooperation amongst stakeholders. Currently, Czech parents lack information that can help with how to combine family life and work.



## C. Policies and experiences in peer countries and stakeholder contributions

### Situation in the peer countries

In **Ireland's** experience, developing ECEC requires a staged approach. The infrastructure had to be built first, and Ireland is now focusing on quality. A Learner Fund supports upskilling of the ECEC workforce. The first stage was to ensure basic skills, but the eventual aim is a graduate workforce. Education-focused inspections of early childhood services are about to be launched, alongside an existing focus on safety, hygiene etc. A quality mentoring service is taking professional development beyond training alone. From 2016, a seven-step model for the inclusion of disadvantaged children will be introduced, and each unit will have a staff member with special training on inclusion. Once that occurs, the unit will receive higher funding. Information and mentoring for parents will be next. With many policy areas involved, a forward strategy required involving many departments and ministries.

**Latvia** has traditionally followed a demand-led ECEC strategy within a universal system, where local government provides childcare. From 2013, some experimental projects have been implemented. These include State-subsidised access to private kindergartens or child-minders for parents who do not benefit from public childcare. Registration and regulation of child-minders have been introduced, including provisions on qualifications and safety. This has resulted in waiting lists being reduced by about 22 % over two years overall and by 32 % in the capital, Riga. There are now 1,500 registered child-minders. In 2014, about 10,000 parents received financial support for private childcare. This system is popular and provides greater choice. A voucher system is envisaged, which may be extended to the public sector. A project on flexible childcare provision for parents working unsocial hours has been launched in 2015.

One difference between **Croatia** and the Czech Republic is that Croatian kindergartens take children from the age of 6 months until they start school. There are no separate nurseries. Within kindergartens, there are mixed-age groups. Experience shows that this is a good thing for the children and developing social and intellectual skills. A successful programme called "Let's Grow Up Together" was introduced by the ministry and UNICEF in 2009. It encourages professionals to work with parents to reinforce their parenting skills. A similar programme for parents of disadvantaged children was launched in 2014. In the 1990s, preschool education was decentralised. All kindergartens are now run by municipalities or regions, but supervision is still performed by central government, and the legal framework is national. The law specifies high training standards, and Croatian kindergarten teachers are university-educated. However there are not enough kindergarten places, and more need to be created. The challenge is to organise quality education for all children. The ECEC curriculum is now being changed, and this will pose further challenges.

In **Romania**, five public actors are involved in ECEC – the labour, social and family ministry, the health ministry, the education ministry, the public finance ministry and local authorities. There is no monitoring structure, and this needs to be created. A major strength of the existing preschool system is the considerable experience with innovative curricula and staff training. Several preschool programmes for children aged 3-6 are being implemented by



NGOs and funded by donors, such as UNICEF, the World Bank and the EU. In 1992, the Romanian educational curriculum for 3–6-year-olds was revised. For the first time, a section on early education was included for kindergartens. The curriculum is being continuously reviewed to include child-centred learning principles. A positive development has been the introduction of continuous teacher training programmes. However, a major weakness is that there are few training courses and institutions for teachers dealing with children below the age of 3. Some progress has been made with preschool access for children from minority and disadvantaged groups. Special programmes to increase Roma children's access to preschool have been introduced by UNICEF in cooperation with NGOs, and later expanded through pilot projects. Information centres for parents on early childhood issues were set up in 1992 by the government with UNICEF and the World Bank. Education programmes for parents have been developed by the education ministry, NGOs and local authorities, and some focus on 0–3 years. However, the effectiveness of the programmes has been hindered by the absence of mechanisms for cooperation between the education, health and social ministries. A working group is now drawing up a national strategy. Due to a lack of legislation prior to 2012 on care for 0–3 year-olds, some crèches have grown up without any clear emphasis on structure and educational standards. A new education law adopted in 2011 officially promotes the concept of ECEC and preschool education in Romania. It specifies that nurseries, kindergartens, day-care centres and crèches can use the same curriculum and standards. In ECEC services for 0–3-year-olds, educators working in shifts should be part of the staff structure and there should be a maximum educator-child ratio of 1:7.

The situation in **Slovakia** is similar to that in the Czech Republic. Many nurseries available up to the 1990s subsequently disappeared. Responsibility for them is currently moving from the health ministry to the social ministry. Some funding is available for human resources and an integrated operational programme, which should help to develop facilities for children aged under 3. The money can also be used for nursery staff training. The Slovak Republic supports families financially. Parental leave, with a financial allowance, can be taken up to when the child is 3 years of age. There is also a childcare allowance. The aim is to increase this in 2016. This allowance can be used to pay for nursery care. It is currently EUR 230 per month.

A number of laws and decrees govern the ECEC system in **Finland**. Access is a universal right. There is a legal obligation to provide a place for every child upon request. Resources, staff qualifications and fees to clients are also stipulated by law. The fees are currently modest, but the government is looking to increase fees, and restrict ECEC access to 20 hours per week for parents who are not working or studying fulltime. At present, parents can decide how many hours per day they use the service, and whether to use public ECEC or take a homecare or private care allowance instead. Care and education are not regarded as separate. Staff are well-trained, but more teachers are needed. There are national curriculum guidelines with an updated curriculum starting in 2017. In 2013, responsibility for ECEC was moved from the social and health ministry to the education ministry. It took 23 years to make that change, and involved political discussion about whether ECEC is a social service, a labour service or an educational service. It is now accepted that it is mainly educational, and it has become the starting point of the education system. So the main change is one of attitude, concepts and terminology. There were also some technical issues and changes to be made to the legislation. Finland believes strongly that one of ECEC's tasks is to allow parents to study and work. It is also an important family service, and it is



a children's policy. Children's education and inclusion must be at the heart of ECEC. But all of its tasks are interlinked and must be tackled together.

## European stakeholder statements

**COFACE**, a network of 60 family organisations in 24 EU States, indicated challenges for quality early childcare. Deregulation threatens quality standards. Economic pressures are forcing local authorities to outsource ECEC to private providers without quality checks. Cost is important, e.g., in Belgium for low-income families, 80-90 % of childcare costs are covered. Family organisations are pressing for this to be increased to 100 %. For childcare workers, time away from the children (for reflection, preparation, peer support and administrative tasks) is important.

Regional differences in supply and demand make it difficult to ensure the same quality of ECEC services nationwide. A similar problem can arise with provision for ethnic or cultural minorities – for example, the Roma. There is a need to make the childcare profession more attractive, through pay increases and opportunities for advancement. As regards bringing more men into the profession, a programme in Germany is described in COFACE's paper. Childcare opening hours are another issue identified by COFACE members. Multilingualism and inclusion are challenges that will grow. Diversity and flexibility in childcare are important. Stakeholder involvement, including parents, is vital, also civil society organisations can contribute their knowledge.

It is important to better understand quality, both structural factors (group size, adult-child ratio, staff training and qualifications, curriculum, staff conditions, staff turnover) and process factors (the child's daily experience, communication, interactions etc.). It is important to emphasise that, as well as formal and informal services, semi-formal childcare exists (various types of recognised child-minders in some countries). COFACE advocates national and EU quality standards focusing on the improvement of recognition and qualifications.

As regards governance, ECEC should be an integral part of the education system as now occurs in Finland. Policies should foster interaction between NGO services, parental support and ECEC professionals. Digital support, advice and interaction tools can help. For example, COFACE's Finnish member has a website with videos, forums, online courses etc. ([www.perheikka.fi](http://www.perheikka.fi)).

Interactions between labour markets, parental leave, and childcare demand may vary according to culture, economy, region and values, COFACE pointed out. Paid parental leave contributes to both higher female employment and higher fertility. Evidence suggests that take-up rates for fathers are higher where leave is based on individual entitlements for each parent, paid at a high replacement rate and able to be used flexibly - for example, on a part-time basis in combination with part-time employment. "Use it or lose it" quotas for each parent's leave (as for Norway's 3-month "daddy leave") may encourage uptake. Employer flexibility, affordable childcare, annual leave and tax policy also have an impact on parents' choices. The political discourse on childcare is shifting from redistribution to pre-distribution (parental leave, back-to-work schemes, part-time work), focusing on employability, human capital and skills.



**EUROCHILD**, a child rights-based network, emphasised that children must be central to childcare provision. Like most countries, the Czech Republic has endorsed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which indicates that children have a right to the protection and support of both parents and that governments should ensure that children's rights are protected and promoted. Poverty – experiential, economic and material – goes with other forms of economic and social exclusion, and such disadvantage leads to unequal and adverse outcomes. The constructive involvement of fathers improves children's outcomes, even if father and mother do not live together. However, the children least likely to receive both parents support are those already disadvantaged in other ways. Lack of father involvement is correlated with other gender inequality, and these issues should be tackled together.

ECEC quality needs to be measured in terms of children's outcomes. Longitudinal data show that inequalities are measurable very early and persist throughout life. Poorer development in traumatised or neglected children is measurable at the age of six months. Neural science shows that learning and brain development are more rapid in the first three years than later. If we neglect this, we are missing opportunities to promote children's rights, increase equality and achieve the best possible outcomes for our population. Also early life experiences play a role in school failure, teen pregnancy and criminality; obesity, hypertension, depression and addictions in the third and fourth decades; coronary heart disease and diabetes in the fifth and sixth decades; and premature ageing and memory loss in later life.

It is important to collect the right kind of data: a few years ago in Scotland, the regulatory body asked the people who hold Scottish longitudinal cohort data to plot each child's outcomes against the grades awarded to the preschool establishment that the child had attended. They found that there was no correlation whatsoever. In other words, an establishment could have awarded "excellent" grades and yet not have made any difference to children's outcomes or to equality. The only exceptions were specialised establishments for children who were subject to protection measures or had been removed from their parents' care. Hence Scotland has now taken to measuring children's well-being as a marker of ECEC quality.

## D. Main issues discussed during the meeting

Many of the issues discussed relate to the Commission Recommendation “Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage” (2013). Probably the largest factor influencing the experience of parents is the way the combination of employment and childcare is organised. Women, far more than men, are confronted with the problem of reconciling the pursuit of a working career with caring responsibilities. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has become a matter of serious public concern throughout Europe, and is central to the Investing in Children recommendation of the EU. Good quality, affordable ECEC helps the reconciliation of work and family life and thus fosters parental labour market participation and gender equality. Improving childcare may also improve declining fertility rates, by lowering the cost of childbearing in terms of employment and career opportunities.

One issue is how to increase childcare capacity and ensure quality. In 2002, EU States agreed to have places for 33 % of all under 3s, but many EU States are far from reaching the Barcelona childcare targets. Barriers are financial and ideological. Two strategies are possible: demand-led and supply-led. In a demand-led strategy, the government creates a market by providing parents with resources to buy childcare from suppliers. Under the supply-led approach, the government creates a universal right to childcare, with local authorities required to provide the necessary capacity. The service may be free or with payment linked to income. Supply-led provision may be more expensive than demand-led, but may deliver more uniform quality. With a demand-led approach, capacity may increase rapidly, but quality is a problem, and monitoring and inspection are needed.

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Should access to ECEC be universal or targeted, for instance, through means-testing? An approach called “targeted universalism” or “progressive universalism” can be considered, where a universal service is provided, but additional targeted support is related to need. Once capacity exists, quality needs to be ensured. The European Commission proposed a framework for quality, access, staff training, child ratios, curriculum, monitoring and inspection in ECEC, which is also a product of peer learning through the Open Method of Coordination ([http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)).

A complicated challenge is that the policy objectives on participation, gender equality, fertility and social integration may not appear to be compatible. Long parental leave or a favourable financial incentive may not promote labour supply and may result in large differences in male and female working patterns. Another issue is parental choice. Parents may differ in their preferences regarding work and family life. This often results in a complicated mix of leave options, financial allowances and services that may not be coherent and may not be favourable for gender equality. Childcare systems in EU countries combine elements of labour market and parental leave policies, as well as a broad range of childcare possibilities. Parental leave is relevant, as are employment regulations in terms of whether they allow for flexibility in the labour market, with opportunities to work part-time, flexible or atypical hours, which can help parents with childcare provision. Flexibility in the workplace providing opportunities for matching working hours with family responsibilities, such start time, leaving work early, or working from home, can help reconcile employment and parenthood.





It is common to distinguish between childcare provision for children under 3 years old and preschool children (from 3 years until compulsory school age). There are many types of child care, which may be formal and recognised officially through registration, or informal and unregistered. The types of child care used in Europe include group settings and individual child settings. Group settings include day nurseries, nursery schools, nursery classes (attached to school), playgroups, preschools, kindergartens, children's centres and family centres. The latter two often offer additional services beyond child care, such as family support or health services. Individual childcare settings typically may be for a single child or a small number of children looked after by one caregiver. Individual childcare settings include grandparents or relatives, unregistered nannies and child minders.

Is there is an optimal age for a child to start in ECEC? The starting age is less important than the quality of the environment for the child. If day-care is of high quality, a child can go into it early. Some studies have found that children in group care showed benefits from that group care, as opposed to individual care, from age 2 years upwards. Below age 2 years, group care made no difference. This is probably because from age 2 years onwards, children have developed sufficient language and social competences to benefit from a group setting. Also, group settings tend to be better at providing a range of experiences beyond those found at home (Melhuish et al., 2015).

In considering the issue of ECEC services from the point of view of the child's development the quality of the service is significant. Quality of childcare refers to aspects that contribute to the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child. There is a lack of harmonised statistics on this matter, but large variation exists across Europe. Staff:child ratios, for example, seem to differ widely between European countries, as does staff educational level. Furthermore, in almost all countries there is a large difference in the nature of provision between nursery schools, pre-schools, kindergartens, crèches, and child-minders.

It is recognised that staff qualifications and training are central to improving the quality of ECEC services. Every country in the EU is rethinking, renewing or implementing professional development. They are looking for sustainable and innovative practices, trying to network within their systems and between countries, moving towards better monitoring and evaluation processes. There is some dispute as to necessary training levels, with many countries having different requirements for practitioners depending on the age of children. There is an increasing consensus towards the professionalisation of ECEC staff, which is growing at the policy level. Professional development in ECEC applies to a range of activities that attempt to increase the knowledge, skills and attitudes of ECEC staff as they undertake child development and care, early education as well as educational support services, home visits and related activities such as parent support. Professional development includes pre-service training and ongoing professional development in the field. The evidence suggests that a range of in-service professional development activities and support for teacher-child interactions is required, instead of a narrow focus on pre-service academic qualifications (Early et al., 2007).

Programmes promoting ECEC access by disadvantaged children were discussed, for example, the low access by Roma children in the Czech Republic. Making the last preschool year compulsory may help to change that, but it may overburden the present ECEC capacity. While the compulsory preschool year helps, but it still leaves a huge disadvantage. It will mean that Roma children are starting at age 5, but before that age not much is happening.

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Also many disadvantaged groups are essentially alienated from mainstream society. They may see a State organisation as part of that society, and therefore reject it. In very disadvantaged families, where children are at risk of poor development, the families often will not access children's services. There is a need to get these communities and parents involved in the services, so that they feel that they have some ownership and power. Evaluation of Sure Start, the UK programme for giving children the best possible start, showed that some schemes were effective but others were ineffective. A characteristic of more effective programmes was active steps to empower parents and the workers in those services. They had a say in the structuring of services and the way in which they were provided (Anning et al., 2007). Good ECEC is a right that should not be dependent on ability to pay. However, it has to be ensured that governments are not subsidising poverty wages and exploitative employment.



## E. Conclusions and lessons learned

A country's future depends on how it treats children. It is almost always cheaper, more effective, and more sustainable to prevent problems rather than to try and cure them later. The most effective approach to ECEC is high-quality universal services, with additional individual focussed support for those who need it, in a “progressive universalism” approach.

A child's development is strongly influenced by patterns of interactional experience. Interactions drive development. For the 0-3 age group, interactions where adults respond appropriately to the behaviour and communications of the child are a particularly important aspect of the quality of care, and this is related to children's language, social and emotional development. As children get older interactional experience will continue to drive development. Hence effective practice is largely based on relationships – between parent and child, practitioner and parent, practitioner and child, parent and parent, because relationships are based on interactions. This is why lack of stability in childcare is so disruptive to quality of care, because relationships require stability. Good quality of care is impossible without stability of care. If we support these relationships, we will help our children to grow up well. That is the foundation of prosperity and a high quality of life for all.

In Europe there is a broad range of options that parents can choose from to cater for their childcare needs. In some countries, there are clear models of childcare, e.g., in formal settings in Scandinavian countries, or the long parental leave schemes in Central and Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, it seems that parents prefer flexibility of care options, and often combine various childcare instruments. The use of particular care arrangements often depends on a child's age, labour market opportunities and the cultural and social norms relating to the role of women and childcare provision. Some parents prefer full-time care whereas for others part-time provision is sufficient. Part-time work when children are young can help with being economically active and managing childcare responsibilities. Also full-time participation in formal childcare is not prerequisite for high female labour force participation. It is clear that one model of childcare will not suit all parents and that EU Member States cannot be overly prescriptive regarding particular types of childcare. It is essential that policies cater to the preferences of parents and the needs of children. At the same time, it is important that policies reflect best knowledge about child development and promote options that help all children achieve their full potential.

In order to meet the needs of parents, it is important that governments support a range of different childcare options, and provide opportunities for women to enter and remain in the labour market should they wish to do so. It is the responsibility of public policy to make sure that choice is really available for parents and that in particular mothers, are not excluded from the labour market or forced involuntarily to work part-time due to the lack of childcare provision. It is also crucial that equal working conditions and opportunities for professional development and career progression are provided for parents across sectors and occupations. This would ensure that those who are temporarily out of the labour market (for instance on childcare leave) or working part-time (voluntarily or involuntarily) are not disadvantaged compared to full-time workers without childcare responsibilities. As parents prefer flexibility in reconciliation, the state should ensure that all parents are provided with suitable childcare provision and supported in their labour force participation.

Social mobility is under threat from increasing segregation. ECEC can help. The Peer Review had shown that childcare and parental leave interact. If you improve childcare, people use less parental leave and vice versa. It was also noted that high staff turnover is a huge threat to quality in ECEC, due to the importance of relationships. The threat of poverty to a child growing up in a single-parent family is two to three times higher than if both parents around. There are likely to be more single parents, and if single parenthood is combined with other risk factors, there may be detrimental outcomes for children. We must present the evidence that ECEC is a good investment.

Considering the discussed challenges, a number of key conclusions and lessons learned emerged from this Peer Review:

- **Good-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) are part of the infrastructure for a successful society.** So is good parenting. The first 3 years of life are crucially important to a person's development, and not least to language development. Children with good language development do better later on in terms of literacy and most educational outcomes. Across the OECD countries in 2009, 15-year-olds who had attended pre-school were, on average, a year ahead of those who had not. Research also points to fewer behavioural problems and less delinquency, crime and drug use among those who had attended pre-school, as well as higher earnings and lower welfare dependency. So **investment in ECEC can reduce other costs to government.**
- **Disadvantaged children** benefit greatly from high-quality ECEC.
- **Family policy, gender equality and the employment of women are interconnected policy areas.**
- **Greater integration between education and care in early childhood can yield benefits.** Split models may produce less continuity during children's lives. They may also lead to lower-quality services for the younger children, due to lower staff qualifications, the lack of a curriculum and higher staff turnover.
- **Adequate public investment in ECEC can help to avoid a trade-off between quality and quantity.**
- **Supply-led ECEC provision tends to be more expensive than demand-led, but it also tends to deliver more uniform quality.** Under a demand-led approach, capacity can be rapidly increased, but quality is a problem. As private suppliers are involved, strong regulation, standard-setting, monitoring and inspection are needed. There is no evidence from continental Europe that increased commercial competition in ECEC automatically produces higher quality. Indeed, a for-profit approach can lead to lower investment in quality.
- Where there is a shortage of ECEC capacity, a decision may be taken to **give priority to quantity over quality.** But once capacity has been created, quality needs to be ensured. In 2014, the European Commission proposed a framework for quality, with provisions on access, professionally trained staff, child-staff ratios, curriculum, monitoring and inspection.
- **Cooperation among all the ECEC stakeholders** is essential, and especially the full involvement and empowerment of the parents.



- **Greater parental leave sharing between partners** should be encouraged. In the Czech case, the Expert Commission believes that an insurance-based system for allowances could help to reduce the financial loss to families if the higher-earning partner takes parental leave. Non-transferable equal portions of paid leave time for each parent are another possible option, but special measures then need to be taken in order to avoid disadvantaging single-parent families in terms of total paid leave time.

These learning points offer opportunities for transferability of policy ideas between EU countries, from which all may benefit as they endeavour to implement the Commission Recommendation “Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage” (2013). The Investing in Children recommendation is closely linked to the EU’s Social Investment Package (SIP), which takes a lifecycle approach to strengthening people’s future capacities. The outcomes of the Peer Review can feed into the work of the newly established Expert Commission for Family Policy in the Czech Republic and help to respond to the Country-specific recommendations.

Also enhancing the quality of childcare will affect language, social and emotional development. As these aspects of development, particularly language development, are the foundation for later educational and social development, then there are likely to be longer-term consequences for these aspects of development. Such impacts may well affect longer-term EU-2020 goals through improving children’s outcomes including reducing early school-leaving and improving access to higher education, which in turn may lead to overall poverty reduction, and enhanced social inclusion, resulting from improved employment amongst the population.

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## Provision of quality early childcare services

Host country: **Czech Republic**

Peer countries: **Croatia - Finland - Ireland - Latvia - Romania - Slovakia**

Stakeholders: **Eurochild - COFACE**

The Peer Review held in Prague in November 2015 discussed Czech family policy at a time of change, and more specifically the future shape of the country's early childhood education and care. Drawing on the experience of peer countries, international experts, the European Commission as well as local and European stakeholder organisations, it identified a number of practical lessons both for the Czech Republic and for the EU as a whole.

