



**Starting Strong:
Early Childhood Education and Care**

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**Introductory presentation by
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Introduction

Let me say, first of all, that the OECD is extremely grateful to the Government of Sweden, the Ministry of Education and Science and the National Agency for Education for hosting this major international conference on early childhood education and care. I would like to thank, in particular, Minister Ingegerd Wärnersson for her support for this event and to congratulate her team, headed by Barbara Martin-Korpi, for all the hard work that has gone into the preparations.

I should also like to pay a tribute to the relevant ministries of the twelve countries which have participated in the early childhood review. Without their funding, their enthusiasm for the project and the national research they have provided, the review could not have taken place. It is great to see so many of the National Co-ordinators and authors of the national Background Reports present at the Conference.

I would also like to acknowledge the contributions made by the 39 international experts and ministry officials from 15 countries who took part in the OECD review teams. This thematic review has truly been an outstanding example of a collaborative international effort.

Finally, I would like to extend a special greeting to the delegates from non-member countries. They have been invited to our conference by the Basic Education division of UNESCO, under the direction of Mme. Aïcha Bah Diallo, and I would like to thank UNESCO for its collaboration.

In my brief address to you this morning, I would like to stress the important place that early childhood education and care is assuming in OECD work, and among policy-makers in OECD countries.

The importance of ECEC within the context of OECD work

In recent years, the OECD has accorded a high priority to issues concerning children, family, and the community – with a special emphasis on the importance of early childhood education and care. In our work on *human and social capital*, for example, we have investigated the links between ECEC and *sustained growth and development*. We have learned that strong partnerships between families and providers can enhance children’s development, strengthen parental skills and self-esteem, and in some cases, contribute to community-building. Our work on *employment-oriented social policies* has highlighted the need for “family-friendly” policies which can help parents balance work and family responsibilities.

Finally, over the past five years, the OECD Education Committee has pursued its mandate to make *lifelong learning a reality for all*. This life-course perspective has created a framework for studying strategies to improve quality in, and access to, early childhood education, in co-operation with families. The meeting this April of OECD Education Ministers, which was attended by Minister Wärnersson, has further underlined the importance of the early years of children’s lives as a policy priority and given us a mandate to pursue further work on this field.

Why are OECD countries interested in ECEC policy?

In OECD countries, the review highlights how early childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention over the past decade. Three major policy objectives lie behind this trend:

a) To strengthen short- and long-term educational, emotional and social outcomes for children

First, policy interest has been motivated by research showing the importance of quality early experiences to children's short-term cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as to their long-term success in school and later life. The plasticity of early brain development means that investment in ECEC may prevent more costly and less effective remediation later in children's lives. Research showing the link between the *quality* of provision and children's development has been incorporated into policy objectives to improve existing services. By investing in quality early childhood education and care, countries are seeking to make the most of these early opportunities to promote children's development and learning in order to give them a good start on the road to lifelong learning.

b) To foster equity and social integration objectives.

Second, equity concerns have led policymakers to focus on how access to quality early childhood services can offset some of the negative effects of poverty on children and form part of a long-term strategy to break the cycle of disadvantage. Child poverty, and its detrimental impact on child well-being, is a major concern in many OECD countries. Hence, it is natural for governments to focus on the role of early childhood policy and programmes in promoting social cohesion. Such programmes can provide marginalised families, particularly those from

immigrant and ethnic minority communities, with an opportunity to develop informal networks and to access the health, education and social services that will facilitate their social integration.

c) To promote equal opportunities for men and women to participate in the labour force.

Finally, in to-day's labour market, more women—and also more men—are facing dual and sometimes conflicting labour market and family responsibilities. As a result, many countries are investing in early childhood education and care as a prime way to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities. Not only are more women with young children participating in the labour market, but they are involved in a wide range of employment types (part-time work, sub-contracting, temporary and casual employment, work at home, self-employment). The range and complexity of parental working patterns presents a significant challenge for early childhood policy. There also is a need for the labour market to be more flexible in accommodating the needs of parents, given that more equitable sharing of family responsibilities between men and women is a goal in many OECD countries.

A conclusion that I would draw from this is that, though early childhood provision is often given an impetus by labour market needs, notably to raise the labour force participation rates of women, it fulfils a range of much broader social needs. Quality early childhood policies and programmes focus primarily on the best interests of children, and serve also the important goals of equity and social integration.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to highlight, in very general terms, some of the main themes which have emerged from the review and which are summarised in the comparative report, *Starting Strong*. Three central and common themes in an effective strategy to promote early childhood education and care are:

- (i) the clear taking on of responsibility by the state for young children and their families;
- (ii) the political will to fund services adequately, and to energise and integrate services to serve multiple needs; and
- (iii) the professionalisation of the early childhood field, with the need to train and remunerate adequately personnel, not least those engaged in the development of the younger children.

The review also highlighted four challenges which have still to be resolved satisfactorily in many countries: integrated policymaking; the role of the education system in ECEC; staffing issues; work on data and indicator development. We, at OECD, working in collaboration with you, as representatives of the OECD member countries, will pursue follow-up work to address these challenges.

As part of the follow-up, we will continue monitoring trends and policy developments, not only through overall national reviews, but also via streamlined reviews focussed on issues on which a particular country may need a special input. In addition, our discussions over the next two days will point us towards other topics where further work by OECD would be fruitful in this vital area of early childhood education and care.