

France

Population: 60.42 m. **Fertility rate:** 1.89. **GDP per capita:** USD 27 200. **Children under 6 years:** 4.5 m.

Female labour force participation: For women aged 15-64, the labour force participation rate was 63.7% in 2004, 23.6% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 4.8%) (OECD, *Employment Outlook*, 2005).

Labour force participation rate of women with a child(ren): 65% of women with youngest child under 6 are employed, accounting for 23% of total part-time employment (2002) (OECD, *Society at a Glance*). For mothers with youngest child under 3, the rate is 49.5% (2004) (EUROSTAT).

Maternity and parental leave: 16 weeks of maternity leave for 1st child and 26 weeks for subsequent children, paid at full earning. Further leave (*congé parental d'éducation*) is available until child's 3rd birthday, unfunded unless combined with the *Allocation parentale d'éducation* for parents with two or more children, when a flat rate stipend is paid. The allocation can also be combined with a salary for part-time work beginning at least 6 months before the end of the allocation. Fathers are entitled to 11 days of paid, job-protected leave (*congé de paternité*).

Average duration of parental leave: 30 weeks.

Compulsory school age: 6 years.

Social expenditure: 28.5%. **Child poverty rate:** 7.5% after taxes and transfers (OECD average is 11.2%).

Funding of pre-primary educational services (ISCED Level 0): 0.7% of GDP (0.65% public and 0.03% private), 11.7% of education budget and 17.3% of education enrolments. To this may be added public investment in crèches, family day care, école maternelle for 2- to 3-year-olds, leisure-time services for young children, and publicly subsidised home-based care – bringing the total investment to at least 1% of GDP.

Unit cost per child in pre-primary education: (in USD converted using PPP): USD 4 512 (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005).

Funding of services for children under 3: Not available, but given the extent of coverage (27% in family day care or crèches, plus home-care funding, plus 35% of all children enrolled in the école maternelle by age 2.5 years), the figure is probably in the region of 0.5% of GDP.

Average costs to parents: Children 0-3 years: 27% of costs; children 3-6 years: free.

Legal entitlement to a free service: 3 years, but depending on the commune, can begin from 2 years.

Major service types and duration: Centre-based, public options include: crèches for children 0-3 years; écoles maternelles for children 3-6 years (in certain communities, 2 years). Individual options include: *assistantes maternelles* (literally “maternal assistants”),

that is, family day care providers who care for one to three children in the provider's home on a regular basis; *garde à domicile* or home care giving is increasing in use, but though supported fiscally is not regulated in terms of training or programme standards.

Rate of access to regulated services: For children aged 0-3 years: accredited family day care providers take in charge 18% of young children 0-3 years, crèche services 8%, with a further 35% of 2- to 3-year-olds enrolled in the *école maternelle*. Figures for out-of-school provision for children (6-12 years) are not available.

Designation and professional qualifications of key staff: 75% of staff in crèches and child care services are required to have an appropriate diploma. In the *école maternelle*, all teaching staff must have, in principle, the diploma of *professeur d'école*. Auxiliary staff (ATSEM) are required since 1992 to hold a CAP or secondary level certificate in early childhood. Older ATSEM working in the services are often untrained.

Child-staff ratios: For child care, ratios and group sizes are recommended, but not for the *école maternelle*. Average ratios are: children 0-2 years: 5:1; children 2-3 years (except *école maternelle*): 8:1; *école maternelle* (children 3-6 years): 25.5:1; OSP for children 6-12 years: not available.

Auspices and context

In France, child care and early education fall under separate ministerial auspices. For children under 3, the *ministère des Affaires sociales, du Travail et de la Solidarité* and the *ministère de la Santé, de la Famille et des Personnes handicapées* develop the regulations for the different forms of non-school ECEC and define, with the national family allowance fund (*Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales – CNAF*), the goals and resources of the regional family allowance funds over a four-year period. The decentralised CAFs, or *Caisses des allocations familiales*, are the key actors in supporting local policy development. Over the past 30 years, their priority has been to develop ECEC settings in partnership with the *communes* and non-profit associations, and sometimes *départements*. The *Direction Générale de l'Action Sociale* is the administrative unit responsible for non-school ECEC and is jointly affiliated to both ministries.

In contrast, a single, universal model of pre-school education, the *école maternelle*, exists, and is available to all children from 3-6 years. The programme – fully funded and organised by the State – is part of the national education system, under the auspices of the *ministère de la Jeunesse, de l'Éducation nationale et de la Recherche*. The Ministry defines the curriculum, opening hours, and operations of the *école maternelle*. It recruits, trains, and remunerates the teaching staff and inspectorate. The physical infrastructure is the responsibility of the local *commune*: construction and maintenance of buildings; provision of class rooms and educational spaces; pedagogical materials; etc. A sub-ministry focused on youth affairs, *ministère chargé de la jeunesse*, works closely with the *ministère des Affaires sociales* in regulating and monitoring leisure-time centres and staff that serve children under 12 years.

Labour force rates: In 2004, the labour force participation rate was 63.7% for women aged 15-64, rising from 58.0% in 1990. Of those, 23.6% were in part-time employment, while male part-time is 4.8% (OECD, *Employment Outlook*, 2005). For mothers with a youngest child under 6, the employment rate was 65% in 2002, and constituted 23% of all part-time employment. For mothers with youngest child under 3, the employment rate was 49.5% in 2004.

Parental leave: At the birth of a first child, mothers in France have a right to 16 weeks of paid, job-protected *congé de maternité* (maternity leave), six of which is generally taken before the birth and ten weeks taken after the birth. From the second or later child, the maternity leave is 26 weeks, with eight weeks to be taken before the birth and 18 weeks taken post-partum. The leave is also extended by at least eight weeks for multiple births. Since 2002, fathers have been entitled to 11 days of paid, job-protected leave (*congé de paternité*). For many years, there was an unpaid parental leave until the child's third birthday, but this has recently been transformed into a three-year, paid parental leave, known as the *Allocation parentale d'éducation* or APE. In order to facilitate women's transition back to employment, it is now possible to receive both the APE and a part-time job income for a limited period starting at least six months before the end of the APE. The current level of the allowance is EUR 484.97 per month.

Access and provision

For children aged 0-3 years, the relevant ministries, aided by the CNAF and the decentralised CAFs activate and administer a diverse and decentralised care system. Publicly subsidised home-based care (64%), accredited family day care providers (18%), and crèche services (8%) form the basis of provision. Centre-based services take the form of *crèches collectives* (centre-based services run by municipalities, departments or non-profit organisations); *crèches parentales* (parent cooperatives) are similar services where parents are involved in the daily management; *crèches familiales* linked with *assistantes maternelles* (family day carers); *crèches d'entreprise* (company crèches, mostly in the public sector and in hospitals); *centres multi-accueil* (open centres) and *haltes garderies* (centres providing temporary care for a number of hours) are among the most usual models in use.

Children have a legal right to a place in an *école maternelle* (pre-school) from the age of three years, but in many communes, enrolments can be made from 2 years. By the age of two-and-half years, 35% of all children are enrolled. From 3 years, enrolments reach approximately 90% of the age cohort. The organisation of groups is by age: the *petite section* for 3-year-olds; the *moyenne section* for 4-year-olds and the *grande section* for 5-year-olds. Mixed age grouping is uncommon in urban centres but occurs frequently in rural centres. Those schools with 2-year-olds contain a *toute petite section*. The *écoles maternelles* are part of the primary school system, including church affiliated pre-schools under contract from the State. There are also private *jardins d'enfants* open for 3- to 6-year-olds. These vary in terms of opening hours and fees. Outside of school hours (and Wednesday afternoons) children may attend leisure time centres (*garderie* or *centre de loisirs sans hébergement*). *Halte-garderies* operated by municipalities and non-profit providers, offer part-time and occasional care, often for parents who work non-standard hours.

Individual child care options include: *assistantes maternelles* (literally “maternal assistants”), that is family day care providers who care for one to three children in the provider's home on a regular basis. Most work directly for the parents, although some work within a family crèche network (*crèche familiale*). In-home caregivers (*garde à domicile*) work in the child's home and are not subject to the same regulations as family day carers.

Some out-of-school provision (OSP) is provided when the pre-schools are not in operation. On Wednesdays, after-school, and during short vacations, *centres de loisirs sans hébergement* (CLSH – leisure centres) serve about 280 000 of the 2.2 million children aged 3 to 6. About 53% of CLSH are operated by non-profit associations, 42% by the communes, and 5% by

businesses, the CAF or individuals. They are open about 100 days per year. *Écoles maternelles* and schools increasingly supply after school care, linked to recreational activities and guided home-work.

Rates of provision

0-3 years: Most children are cared for by parents (64%), followed by licensed family child care (*assistantes maternelles*) (18%), crèches (8%), grand-parents (4%) or through other arrangements (6%). Many children are cared for by multiple arrangements in any given week. *Assistantes maternelles* payments are minimum EUR 222/month (Background Report for France, 2003).

3-6 years: Almost 100% of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds and approximately 35% of 2-year-olds attend the free *écoles maternelles*.

Children with diverse needs

Children with disabilities: Although inclusion is a stated aim of education in France, and attention is given to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream early childhood groups has not been as widely practised as, for example, in Nordic or Italian pre-schools. According to informants, the tradition was to treat disability in children at this age in the home and through the health services and medical institutes. Data on the issue were difficult to obtain, perhaps because a number of ministries and bodies, which gather data in different ways, are involved. However, since 2001, an inter-ministerial policy has been put into place, and 3 400 school assistants (*auxiliaires de vie scolaire*, AVS) were recruited to provide help to individual children to participate in class activities. More than 7 000 assistants were employed by 2003, 6 000 of whom are remunerated by the State. They now assist 11 000 children with special needs, over half of whom are enrolled in the *écoles maternelles*. Different medico-social structures participate in this effort, especially the CAMSP (*les centres d'action médico-sociale précoce* or centres for early medico-social action), and provide advice and support to parents and the *écoles maternelles*.

Children from low-income families: The child poverty rate in France is about 8%, after the effect of fiscal transfers and social policies. Priority is generally given in the public crèche system to families in need, and *écoles maternelles* are encouraged to establish sections for 2-year-old children and upwards in education priority zones.

Ethnic and bilingual children: About 6% of pre-schoolers and elementary school children in France are non-French nationals, mostly from the Maghreb, West and Central Africa, and from Turkey, Portugal and other countries, but many more second language children attend the *écoles maternelles*. Districts of concentrated disadvantage are treated as priority education areas (*zones d'éducation prioritaire* or ZEPs), and their *écoles maternelles* receive extra posts and funding. Zones with a minimum of 20% immigrant children generally can open classes for young children at the age of 2 years.

Quality

Licensing and regulatory regimes: The child and maternal health services (*protection maternelle et infantile* – PMI) under the auspices of the *Conseil Général*, are responsible for licensing and monitoring services for young children outside the school system (including crèches, *assistantes maternelles*, haltes-garderies, CLSH, etc.). Regulations set out in *Décret 1/8/2000* and

Arrêté 26/12/2000 address capacity, building requirements, parent role, adult/child ratio, group size, staff qualifications and affiliations. All *assistantes maternelles* are required to be licensed by the PMI, but a significant number remain outside the system. Many parents recognise, however, that licensing provides assurance of safety and quality for children in this form of ECEC, and also ensures caregivers social security benefits and training. Family day care providers can care for up to 3 children in each home. The *école maternelle* programmes are supervised by the *Inspecteur de l'éducation nationale (IEN)*. The organisation and operation of the *école maternelle* is regulated under the *Code de l'Éducation Décret, 6/9/90*, while Arrêté of 25/1/02 governs schedules and curriculum.

Funding: According to OECD *Education at a Glance (2005)*, France invests 0.7% of GDP in early education services (the *école maternelle*), representing 11.7% of the education budget, but with 17.3% of education enrolments. Unit costs per child approach that of primary education but are considerably less than unit costs at secondary and tertiary levels. Public *écoles maternelles* (covering over 90% of the age group) are completely free except for meals, which in turn are often fully subsidised for families in need. Public investment in *crèches*, family day care, *école maternelle* for 2- to 3-year-olds, and leisure-time services for young children are not included in this figure. Outside the school system, the financing of the ECEC system is relatively complex. Funding involves a number of different actors, direct and indirect grants to settings, as well as family subsidies and tax benefits. It is calculated that in centre-based care, families pay approximately 27% of costs, or about 12% of monthly income.

Staffing and training: The chief contact persons in the different service types are as follows. In *crèches*, *haltes-garderies* and other services supervised by the PMI, staff are generally *puéricultrices* or children's nurses assisted by *éducateurs de jeunes enfants* and *auxiliaires de puériculture*. *Écoles maternelles* are staffed by *institutrices* and increasingly by *professeurs des écoles*, that is, the newer cohorts of teachers who have a basic three-year university degree plus 18 months teacher training, allowing them to teach in both primary and early education. A weakness in this training – noted by the OECD review team – is that certification (specialised training) in early childhood studies and pedagogy is relatively weak.

Training requirements: All child care settings are required to meet the same staff qualification requirements. A minimum of 50% are required to have a diploma of *puéricultrice*, *infirmière*, *éducateur de jeunes enfants*, or *auxiliaire de puériculture*. A quarter of the staff need to have qualifications related to health, social work, or leisure, and a quarter of the staff are exempted from any qualification, as long as the employer provides support for them to perform their work. Teachers in the *école maternelle* are recruited by public examination, open to candidates with a *license*, that is, a 3-year university degree. They are trained for a further 18 months as *professeurs des écoles*. (The older pre-school teachers, *institutrices*, many of whom are still working in the system, were recruited at *Baccalaureat* level, followed by 2 years training). *Puéricultrices* have nurse or midwife qualifications + 1.5 years of specialisation and *éducateurs de jeunes enfants* are trained (for 27 months post bac) in a training centre. *Auxiliaires de puériculture* study 1 year post BEPC (*brevet d'école*).

Work conditions: As with qualifications, conditions vary greatly depending on the type of ECEC. *Instituteurs* and *professeurs des écoles* in *école maternelle* are state public employees (Cat. B/Cat. A respectively). *Puéricultrices* (2.1% men) and *éducateurs de jeunes enfants* (4.6% men) normally work for *collectivités locales* (communities) and non-profit associations as Cat. B (public) employees, having the right to professional development and sometimes to management training. *Auxiliaires de puériculture* (0.7% men) normally work for *collectivités locales* as Cat. C public employees, they are ineligible for regular professional development.

Child-staff ratios: In the *école maternelle*, there are no national regulations for staff-child ratios. In general the number of children per class has decreased over the years: from 30 in 1980, to 25.5 in 2001-02. In ZEPs (*zones d'éducation prioritaire*), schools receive additional posts and funds in order to reduce the child-staff ratios. In the *crèches*, the required staff-child ratio is 1:5 for children who do not walk), and 1:8 for toddlers (children who walk). In the *jardins d'enfants*, the ratio for children over 3 years is 1:15 children.

Curriculum and pedagogy: All pre-schools follow the same national curriculum (current version 2002) focused on five areas: oral language and introduction to writing; learning to work together; acting and expressing emotions and thoughts with one's body; discovering the world; and imagining feeling and creating. To bridge children's learning from pre-school to primary, competences are defined in learning cycles (*cycles d'apprentissage*), e.g. the cycle of *apprentissages fondamentaux* (foundation learning) bridges the last year of *maternelle* and the first two years of elementary school. Ministry of Education evaluation tools are used by teachers to follow the progress of children. There is no curriculum for child care settings although services are required to develop a *projet d'établissement* including a description of the care, development and well-being of the children; services offered, special measures for children with handicaps or chronic illness and competences and backgrounds of the professionals. Family *crèches* need also to outline plans for the training plan for assistants, the professional support provided and the monitoring of children. The *projet d'établissement* translates to a global vision of education and a child's development. Components include the *projet pédagogique*, translating these goals into practical daily activities; the *projet social*, situating the setting within the political, economic social and co-operative framework of the local area, reinforcing the centre's place in promoting social integration and civic engagement and preventing exclusion and inequality. The *projet d'établissement* also addresses how the setting works with other partners – policy makers and other agencies.

Monitoring, evaluation and research: Within the framework of national policy objectives, the *inspecteur d'académie* has the mission of defining educational policy for primary schools, including the *écoles maternelles*. An inspector in charge of the primary schools evaluates each teacher through observations and discussions about once every three to four years. The national agency *protection maternelle et infantile* or PMI, under the auspices of the *Conseil Général* of the Department, has responsibility for licensing and monitoring services for young children outside the school system (including *crèches*, *assistantes maternelles*, *haltes-garderies*, CLSH, etc.).

Parent and community involvement: In the *école maternelles*, the *loi d'orientation* of 1989 recognised parents as members of the education community and encouraged their participation in school life. Parents are formally represented in the elected school council (*Conseil d'école*), but they are not involved in decisions about pedagogy, which are made by the teaching team. Parents, whose schedules allow it, can also have regular contact with teachers at the beginning and end of the day. Formal parent-teacher conferences take place at least once a year. In the *crèche* sector the decree of 1/8/2000 officially recognised the place of families in the operation of ECEC settings as well as the legal status of parent co-operatives. Staff in ECEC are expected to work on strengthening non-hierarchical relationships with parents, adapt to diverse family needs and circumstances, and generally make parents feel welcome.

OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD review team in 2003 were:

- *A focus on quality from the child's perspective:* The review team indicated a need to refocus policy debates on the rights and interests of young children. In the education sector, the current pedagogical approaches could be improved by giving greater attention to children's holistic development and their natural learning strategies, rather than excessively targeting cognitive skills and school outcomes. In the care sector, building on the *Guide d'accompagnement* to the Decree of 2000, the OECD team recommended the development of a *référentiel de qualité* that would open discussion to determine quality and strategies to improve it. The team also encouraged ministries, regions and employers to recognise their role in supporting the reconciliation of work and family life, e.g. by allowing parents to adapt their working hours in ways that meet the needs of their young children.
- *Rethinking the needs of young children* giving special attention to the conditions and practices in place in schools; and according more attention to their psychology, needs and learning patterns in pre-service and in-service training. Special consideration is needed to ensure that pre-schools provide quality care and education to the 2-year-olds from low-income and immigrant backgrounds living in ZEPs.
- *Ensuring a real choice for parents:* The review team commended the development of diverse forms of ECEC, but questioned the policy preference accorded to expanding individual care arrangements in national and often local policy (for both financial and ideological reasons). Given the superior staff qualifications and the known contribution of child care centres to children's early development and learning, it is important for places in *crèches* to be supported, along with other forms of ECEC, in all neighbourhoods. Even if individual arrangements are made available to families, the team contends that centres should be supported to provide critical quality support and training for family day care providers and in-home carers via family day care networks (RAM) and *crèches familiales*.
- *Encouraging mechanisms for coherence and co-ordination at various levels of responsibility:* At ministerial level, by reviewing the joint protocol signed between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs to see how it could be better implemented both at the level of policy and practice. At the level of the sectors, more co-ordination is needed: between the care sector and the education sector, and between the *écoles maternelles* and the *écoles élémentaires*, and between *écoles maternelles* and leisure-time services, especially since quality of the latter is often unregulated. The *contrats éducatifs locaux* are a promising effort to strengthen co-ordination and quality at local level, as are the new early childhood commissions at the department level. The team recommended more financial incentives for local partners to offer joint in-service training and opportunities to exchange concerns and ideas that could help bridge the institutional and attitudinal gaps that exist in the field.
- *Support stable investment in ECEC and a comprehensive system of monitoring* to ensure equitable access to quality ECEC across the regions. One step that would help towards this goal would be to make the *fonds d'investissement* for facilities a permanent source of funding (rather than re-authorised on a yearly basis), in order to allow local authorities to plan more than a year at a time.

- *Strengthen the training of early childhood professionals*, placing greater emphasis on early childhood development and pedagogy. In the care sector, training for staff would benefit from more emphasis on early childhood development and pedagogy to balance the health orientation of the current preparation programmes. In addition, the lack of pre-service training and limited professional development opportunities for both the *assistantes maternelles* and those engaged in *garde à domicile* need to be addressed urgently. In the early education field, the general education level of the *professeurs d'école* is good, but certification in early childhood studies and pedagogy can be weak.
- *Build a career lattice for diverse early childhood staff*: Career progression is critical in order to retain strong expertise in early childhood in the management, guidance, and monitoring of the field. For example, it is important to create articulation agreements across training courses which would help *auxiliaires de puériculture* to become eventually *éducatrices de jeunes enfants* or even *puéricultrices*. This reform would help provide opportunities to improve the overall qualifications of those who work directly with children. To ensure representation of staff from diverse backgrounds, mechanisms should be created to enable staff and family day carers (*assistantes maternelles*) from ethnic backgrounds to be recruited and become qualified in the early childhood sector.