



# Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

## HOW TO USE THE QUALITY TOOLBOX

### Aim

The Quality Toolbox is intended to present “practical solutions” for anyone with a role to play in encouraging quality in ECEC. The toolbox will present five policy levers that are likely to enhance quality. Each lever is accompanied by supporting materials that serve as resources to help implement policy initiatives. The materials include research briefs, international comparisons, lists of strategy options compiled based on countries’ implementation experiences, lessons learned and self-reflection sheets.

These tools are described with accessible language and are designed to help you explore ways to improve ECEC services in your country. They can also be used as background materials for discussion with stakeholders.

### Structure

In recent years, a growing number of OECD countries<sup>1</sup> have made considerable efforts to encourage quality in ECEC, while others are focusing on other aspects of ECEC, such as access and affordability. Countries are at different stages of policy implementation to encourage quality in ECEC. Regardless of which stage countries are at, they might find it useful to learn about what research says and what other countries are doing.

Based on findings from international literature reviews, five policies have been identified as key levers to encourage quality in ECEC:

- Policy Lever 1: Setting out quality goals and regulations
- Policy Lever 2: Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Policy Lever 3: Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
- Policy Lever 4: Engaging families and communities
- Policy Lever 5: Advancing data collection, research and monitoring

Each chapter corresponds to each policy lever. For each policy lever, five action areas are presented.

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<sup>1</sup> When referring to integrated countries in this report, it means countries in which the responsibility for ECEC falls under one ministry at national level. These countries include: Chile, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, Slovenia, Slovak Republic, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

- Action Area 1: Using research to inform policy and the public
- Action Area 2: Broadening perspectives through international comparison
- Action Area 3: Selecting a strategy option
- Action Area 4: Managing risks: learning from other countries' policy experiences
- Action Area 5: Reflecting on the current state of play

It is important to stress that these actions are not suggested in a particular order or in a fixed timeline. In the real world of policy development, policy can develop quickly or over years. Policy development and implementation can occur in a linear progression or go through an iterative process when Ministers and governments change or when the policy environment, public opinions and political imperatives change.

Frequently, advisors are asked to come up with new policy ideas, prepare analytic materials or design programme responses to emerging challenges at short notice. These five action areas have been identified to support them by focusing on the most frequently and urgently asked requests with short notice.

For each area, practical tools are presented as follows. These tools aim to help those developing policy to respond to government directions; be informed of other country responses to urgent priorities of their country; analyse most cost-effective actions; and examine trade-offs between long-term strategies and small, implementable steps ("quick wins"). To this end, the presented tools aim to provide a framework that prepares governments for action – to seize opportunities and help set policy agendas.

Each tool is intended to be a "stand-alone" document; therefore, some research findings, international comparisons, country experiences or figures may appear more than once in different tools. This way, each tool covers comprehensive information and does not require extracting information from different tools.

### ***Action Area 1: Using research to inform policy and the public***

Questions frequently asked by policy makers, stakeholders or the media include, "Why is it important to take action on X or Y? What does research say? What research supports the decision?" To respond on what research shows, the following tool has been prepared.

- Research brief

### ***Action Area 2: Broadening perspectives through international comparison***

Other frequently asked questions may include, "How does our country compare with others in this selected policy area? Are we falling behind? Although it is domestically argued that this policy area needs more action, are we already doing enough in international comparison?" Or it might be necessary to raise the awareness of stakeholders of a need to move forward – without making them feel "imposed upon" by governments. To help manage these situations, the following tool has been prepared, bringing together international perspectives.

- International comparison

### **Action Area 3: Selecting a strategy option**

Other questions that arise are, “What kinds of challenges have other countries faced in implementing this policy lever? What strategies have they used to tackle the challenges? Is there anything we can learn from them? What would be some alternative strategy options that are politically feasible and financially sustainable within our own country context?” To help assess current strategies and identify alternative strategies, the following tool is presented.

- List of challenges and strategy options with country examples

### **Action Area 4: Managing risks: learning from other countries’ policy experiences**

Another question that might be asked is “What can we learn from other countries as success factors and lessons learned to avoid policy failures?” The following tool will be a quick read about challenges and risks to consider when implementing policy initiatives.

- Policy lessons learned

### **Action Area 5: Reflecting on the current state of play**

Priorities are not often set strictly as a result of priority assessment exercises. Often times, a certain policy is to be implemented because it was part of an election package, and a political leader decided to pursue it. However, it is important to constantly reflect on the current situation and continuously make efforts for system improvements. Much reflection and constructive discussions with in-depth thinking will ultimately help prepare to justify a policy decision. To this end, the following tool is suggested.

- Self-reflection sheet

### **Why does ECEC matter?**

A growing body of research recognises that ECEC brings a wide range of benefits, including:

- Social and economic benefits.<sup>2</sup>
- Better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning.<sup>3</sup>
- More equitable outcomes and reduction of poverty.<sup>4</sup>
- Increased intergenerational social mobility.<sup>5</sup>

These research findings have led education and social policy makers to rethink their investment patterns in children and families and to take a “life-cycle” view on child development and family support. In the last decades, this shift in thinking has been observed as visible action. Those OECD countries that spend significantly less on ECEC compared to other levels of education have increased public spending on ECEC (OECD, 2011). Three broad rationales supported their actions:

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<sup>2</sup> Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000; CQO, 1995; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> National Centre for Education Statistics, 2009; Early Childhood Australia, 2009; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004; Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000; NICHD, 1999; Blau, 1999; Shore, 1997; Barnett, 1995; Phillips *et al.*, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, 2009; Heckman and Masterov, 2004; CQO, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> OECD, 2009.

1. ECEC has significant economic and social pay-offs.
2. ECEC supports parents to boost female employment.
3. ECEC is part of society's responsibility to educate children, a measure against child poverty and educational disadvantage.

Justifying more public spending on ECEC has been a challenge, even with “hard evidence” based on experimental studies with randomised trial controls. Children do not have votes or lobbying groups to voice their interest. Certainly, research has played a key role in making a case for them; but, oftentimes, it is not enough. Other factors are also at play.

*First*, political considerations get factored in. Although a growing body of research consolidates the knowledge base on the economic and social returns on investment in ECEC, such research is not often rigorously exploited by politicians in their agenda setting. A culture of evidence-based policy making is emerging in many OECD countries. However, policy making is a highly complex process; and a policy decision is often made not so much on the evidence base but influenced by election cycles, which appeal to voters, *i.e.* highlighting short-term, visible gains. It takes decades to get gains from ECEC, and the short-term pay-offs are often found to be smaller.

*Second*, budgetary aspects play in. All ECEC costs are incurred up front, and providing high-quality ECEC can be expensive. Research has shown that structural indicators, such as staff-child ratios, qualified workforce and duration of the programme, are likely to influence child outcomes. Ensuring such quality indicators is not cheap. But school failure and its social costs later in life are far more expensive.

*Third*, benefits are conditional on “quality”. The economic and social pay-offs depend on different quality indicators, such as staff-child ratios, duration and starting age. When quality indicators are low, research may indicate insignificant or null effects of ECEC.

Addressing these factors in linking research to policy making will require conscious efforts. It is not always clear how to encourage quality in ECEC and how to make a case for it. This toolbox aims to support readers by presenting practical tools and materials that could be used to encourage quality in ECEC.

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