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Early Childhood Education and Care



Participation in education by three- and four-year-olds tends now to be high, though coverage is a third or less of the age group in several OECD countries. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been a growing priority in OECD countries, and the subject of past and ongoing OECD analysis. A major OECD review was published in 2006 – Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, from which many of these conclusions are drawn – which has been followed up with an ongoing international network. There are wide differences between systems, including between those which have a strong “preparation for school” approach and those implementing a broader social pedagogy, between those with mainly public provision and those relying strongly on private household resources, as well as in the relative emphasis on education and childcare. Improving the quality of ECEC is a universal issue, as is enhancing the contribution of ECEC to equity.



INTRODUCTION


Early childhood provision – pre-primary and childcare – has been a growing priority in many countries. Such priority is manifest by demanding parents, who tend more and more to be both employed while their children are young. It is also a phase of education and services increasingly recognised as important in its contribution to a wide range of social, economic and educational goals. At the same time, it is a sector with a complex diversity of players and partners, and one with a significant lack of investment in many countries.

A major OECD review in the field of early childhood – *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, published in 2006 – was a follow-up to an earlier international review published in 2001. Its policy orientations are broadly focused on overcoming the under-developed status of the sector that remains typical of many countries. The Starting Strong Network has continued since then to help countries to develop effective and efficient approaches, and good practice in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). It does so through its clearing house of new policy research, data and methodology development, workshops, and by fostering contacts among professionals worldwide.

In future, policy work on “Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care” will investigate what defines quality, which policies can promote and enhance quality, and how such policies can be effectively put in place. It will focus in particular on the challenge of moving from policy analysis to successful implementation. Our work also focuses on raising the quality of the workforce in early childhood education and care, as well as integrating early learning with broader social policies and the needs of working parents.

KEY FINDINGS

In the majority of countries – but not all – education now begins for most well before 5 years old: Already over two-thirds of the age group of young children aged 3 and 4 years (71.5%) are enrolled in education across OECD countries as a whole, and this rises to nearly 80% (79.8%) in the OECD countries that are part of the European Union. Enrolment rates for early childhood education at this age range from over 90% in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, at one end of the spectrum, to less than a third in Australia, Greece, Korea, Switzerland and Turkey.

 *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, 2010, Indicator C1

Demand for early childhood provision for those aged under 3 years far outstrips supply in all but the Nordic region: The highest levels of enrolment of infants less than 3 years of age in early childhood education and care in publicly-subsidised provision are found in Denmark and Sweden. Apart from these two countries and Finland, the evidence of OECD reviews shows that the demand for services for young children is significantly higher than the places available, even in countries with provision for long parental leave. In countries where public funding for such provision is limited, most working parents must either seek solutions in the private market, where ability to pay significantly influences accessibility to quality services, or else rely on informal arrangements with family, friends and neighbours. The publicly-subsidised services for these young children take several forms: family day care, centre-based *crèche* services and integrated services.


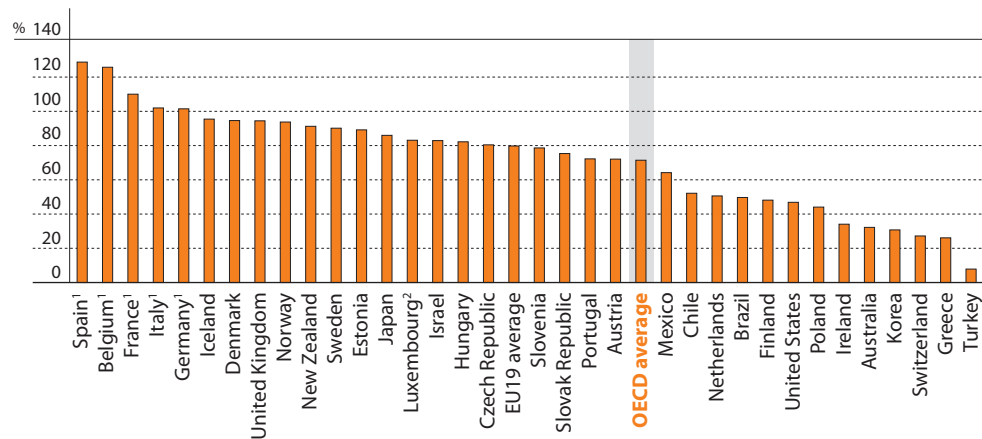
 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 4



Figure 1.1.

Most children come into education well before the age of 5 years (2008)

Children aged 4 years and younger as a percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds
Full-time and part-time students in public and private institutions




1. The rates "4 years and younger as a percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds" include a significant number of children under 3 years of age; the net rates between ages 3 and 5 are around 100%.

2. Underestimated because many resident children are in provision in neighbouring countries.


Source: OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932310415>

Publicly-funded pre-primary provision tends to be more strongly developed in the European than in the non-European countries of the OECD: In Europe, the concept of universal access of 3- to 6-year-olds is generally accepted. Most countries in this region provide all children with at least two years of free, publicly-funded provision before they begin primary provision. With the exception of Ireland and the Netherlands, such access is generally a statutory right from the age of 3 years and in some even before that. Early education programmes in Europe are often free and attached to schools. In OECD countries outside Europe, free early education tends to be only available from age 5, though many children are enrolled from age 4 in Australia, Korea and some US states.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 4

Two broad emphases in early education characterise different countries – preparing for school and social pedagogy: OECD countries approach the partnership between early childhood services and the primary school in different ways – all trying to improve the co-ordination between the sectors but starting from different premises. Broadly, there are two different approaches across countries. France and the English-speaking countries tend to see the question of partnership from the point of view of the school: early education should serve the objectives of public education and provide children with "readiness for school" skills. In contrast, countries inheriting the social pedagogy tradition (the Nordic and Central European countries) see kindergarten as a specific institution turned more to supporting families and the broad development needs of young children.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 3




A positive consequence of decentralisation has been the integration of early childhood education and care services at the local level, leading to a more efficient allocation of resources to children: New services tend to be less bound by traditional competency boundaries than government departments. Many local authorities in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States have brought together children's services and education portfolios to plan more effectively and provide coherence of services for young children and their families. Some local authorities have integrated administration and policy development across age groups and sectors: in Denmark, Italy, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom, for example, an increasing number of local authorities have reorganised responsibility for early childhood education and care, and for schools (and sometimes other children's services) under one administrative department and political committee.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 2

The devolution of powers and responsibilities can, however, also widen differences of access and quality between states, regions or districts: This has occurred in Sweden but is even more evident in federal countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany and the United States, where unified national policies have been difficult to achieve. Unless strong equalising mechanisms are in place, decentralised early childhood administrations in poor urban areas can also face difficulties because of low taxation revenues. Decentralisation and well-intentioned policies in some countries (e.g. Canada and Hungary) have led to the creation of independent rural areas which are too small or too poor to support quality early childhood education and care services without strong state assistance. Even in situations where funding is available (such as in Australia), effective co-ordination can be inhibited by a highly dispersed population, separate state auspices for pre-school education, and a market-oriented approach to childcare.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 2

Disabled children and those with learning and behavioural difficulties receive less additional support at the pre-primary than at the primary level: The median percentage of the children at pre-primary level receiving additional financial resources specifically for "disabilities" was 1.1% in 2003 – significantly lower than for children at the primary level (3.6%), though there are examples (e.g. the United States) of free early childhood education for disabled children. The median percentage of children in pre-primary education receiving additional resources for "learning and behavioural difficulties" is even lower at 0.3% for the countries reporting data in 2003, again with some notable exceptions (e.g. England [9.6%] and Chile [11.5%]). The percentage of children receiving additional resources because of "social disadvantages" was negligible in many countries; in this case, the exceptions were Belgium (French Community) and Mexico with 12.9% and 16.0%, respectively.

 *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, 2008, Chapter 4


POLICY DIRECTIONS

Early childhood education and care policy needs to be systemic and integrate the different forms of early childhood provision, allow universal access, and enjoy a strong and equal partnership with the rest of the education system. The OECD review of this sector proposes ten policy areas for consideration:

- **Place well-being, early development and learning at the core of early childhood approaches:** Rather than being an adjunct to labour market policies with weak development agendas or an under-resourced "Cinderella" education service, early childhood education and care needs to have the child and her/his well-being and learning at the core.



- **Aspire towards early childhood education and care systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy:** The touchstones of a democratic approach are to extend the agency of the child and right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn, and learning to live together are the critical elements to be promoted in each child.
- **Provide autonomy, funding and support to early childhood services:** Within the parameters of system-wide goals and guidelines, educators and services should have the autonomy to plan and to choose curricula for the children in their care; policy should provide the means for staff to exercise such autonomy and participatory approaches.
- **Develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all early childhood education and care services:** Guiding frameworks – especially when they have been developed together by the key stakeholders – help to promote a more even quality across early childhood provision, to guide and support professional staff, and to facilitate communication between staff and families.
- **Base public funding on achieving quality pedagogical goals:** Most countries need to double their annual investment per child to ensure child-staff ratios and qualified staff on some parity with the primary sector; the investment should be directed to achieving quality pedagogical goals rather than simply aiming to create sufficient places.
- **Improve the working conditions and professional education of early childhood education and care staff:** The OECD reviews found a number of common weaknesses that need attention. These are: low recruitment and pay levels, particularly in child care services; lack of certification in specialist early childhood pedagogy; excessive feminisation of staff; and lack of diversity of staff to reflect neighbourhood diversity.
- **Create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance:** These include such elements as strong expert policy units, data collection and monitoring capacity, an evaluation agency, and a pedagogical advisory or inspection corps.
- **Attend to the social context of early childhood development:** Well-organised services should work towards a broad but realistic vision to which the other stakeholders can subscribe, serving at the same time to support parents in child-rearing, facilitate women working, and help social inclusion for low-income and immigrant families.
- **Encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services:** The continuity of children's experience across the different early childhood education and care environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members share information and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning; communities are important both as providers and as offering space for partnerships.
- **Reduce child poverty and exclusion through fiscal, social and labour policies, and increase resources for children with additional learning rights within universal programmes:** Research indicates the effectiveness of universal programmes for children with different disabilities and disadvantages, combined with enhanced funding and investment in quality services, rather than targeted programmes which serve to segregate and stigmatise.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, Chapter 10



References

OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2008), *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties and Disadvantages: Policies, Statistics and Indicators – 2007 Edition*, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.