

Belgium: Flemish Community

Population: c. 6 million. **Fertility rate:** 1.6 **GDP per capita:** USD 28 700. **Children under 6 years:** 375 935.

Female labour force participation: 57.3% of women participate, 34.1% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 6.3%).

Labour force participation rate of women with a child(ren) under 6 years: c. 74% either full- or part-time.

Maternity and parental leave: 15 weeks of maternity leave paid at c. 80% of earnings; parental leave of 3 months or 6 months part-time or 15 months time, all paid at a flat rate. Time-credit breaks are possible for all workers.

Average duration of parental leave: Not available.

Compulsory school age: 6 years.

Social expenditure: 27.2% of GDP. **Child poverty rate:** 5.2%. For Belgium as a whole, the figure is 7.7% after taxes and transfers (OECD average is 11.2%).

Funding of pre-primary educational services: 0.6% of GDP with 16% of education enrolments.

Funding of services for children under 3 and OSP: 0.12% of GDP, of which 74% is public subsidy.

Unit cost per child: Crèche: USD 13 483.40 per child; family day care (or registered child minder): USD 5 818.31; early education (for Belgium): USD 4 442 per child.

Average costs to parents: 0-3 years and out-of-school time provision (OSP): parents contribute 59.7% of costs in subsidised family day care and 26.2% of costs in subsidised centre-based care; children 3-6 years: the *Kleuterschool* is publicly funded and free. Parents pay only incidental costs, about 4%.

Legal entitlement to a free service: From 2.5 years in the *Kleuterschool*.

Major service types and duration: Family day care (covering 54% of places) and *Kinderdagverblijf* (state-subsidised child care centres covering about 22% of children 0-3 years) are the main service types. They both open 11 hours daily for whole year. Just over two-thirds of these services are licensed and subsidised by *Kind en Gezin*. In the education sector, the *Kleuterschool* (public pre-school provision) operates 7 hours daily during the academic year; OSP (out-of-school time provision) operates from 7.00 a.m. (before school hours) and up to 18.00 (after school hours) daily, on Wednesday afternoon and during school holidays.

Rate of access to regulated services: Children 0-2.5 years: 38%; children from 2.5 to 6 years: almost 100% from 3 years; OSP for children 4-7 years: 28% and then declines. 53.2% of children 0-3 years are cared for by parents or family members (35.2% are cared exclusively by a parent; 18% make use also of care by grandparents or families, 0.4% make use

of other informal care). The next largest carer of young children is family day care, which takes in charge 38% of the children not using parental care, that is, well over 54% of the places available.

Designation and qualifications of lead staff: Subsidised child care centres engage certified *kinderverzorgsters* (child carers) with a post-secondary (1 year) professional diploma; *Kleuterschools* engage *kleuteronderwijzers* (nursery school teachers) with 3-year tertiary qualification. These teachers receive salaries equivalent to primary and lower secondary teachers.

Overall % of qualified staff in services: 99% of teachers in early education are fully trained. In the child care sector, only about 25% of the child care jobs require a diploma or certificate (Peeters, 2005, “Childcare in Flanders: the Essential Reversal towards Professionalisation and Sustainability”, VBJK Ghent University). Service managers are all required to have some qualification, and in the public subsidised crèches, a diploma or equivalent training is required for all staff. Training requirements for the private sector are much weaker. In public family day care, some training is required, but not a diploma or educational requirement. Over 30% of OSP workers have a diploma for this type of work.

Child-staff ratios: Average ratios practised are: FDC: 4:1 in full-time care (up to 8 children in part-time); centre-based day care: 6.5:1; pre-school: 17:1 (school year 2001-2002), but 17:2 in the first year, when a child carer works alongside the teacher; OSP: 14 children to one trained adult.

Maximum group size: FDC: 8 children; centre-based day care: centres decide themselves; pre-schools: schools decide themselves (the Department of Education does not impose a maximum group size); OSP for children 6-12 years: centres decide themselves.

Auspices

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, a clear division of responsibilities for education and care exists. Child care and out-of-school care provision is the responsibility of *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family), a Flemish Government agency. The Ministry in charge is the Flemish Ministry for Welfare, Family and Equal Opportunities. The national agency, *Kind en Gezin*, oversees regulations and policies, foresees places and funding to the services. *Kind en Gezin* also determines, in consultation with the sector, the minimum level of quality, monitors the quality of care and stimulates and promotes quality in care. Local authorities and non-profit organisations run child care provision, a role that is partly historical and, in some cases, partly in response to initiatives developed by *Kind en Gezin*.

The Ministry of Education of the Flemish Community has competence for almost all education matters in Flanders (including children 2.5 years and above – see *Access and provision* section). This Ministry sets the broad aims and objectives of education in the Community. Considerable autonomy to organise schools exists, a freedom originally established to guarantee confessional choice. Most schools and educational services fall under one of three main umbrella organisations or networks: Official Community Education that is, non-confessional, Flanders Community education, covering 13.88% of children; Official Subsidised Education organised by local authorities, covering 22.25% of children; and Private Subsidised Education covering 63.86% of pupils.

The Federal Government intervenes with regard to minimum requirements for diplomas, beginning and end of compulsory education, pensions, tax benefits for child care costs, parental leave and career breaks, or with the regions, in employment policy.

Context

Labour force rates: In 2002, 76% of women with a child between 3 and 6 years were in paid employment, and 72% of women with a child under 3 were in paid employment. A rise of 600 000 in the active working population in the past 30 years is attributed to increased participation by women. Concurrently the male working population has decreased. One woman in three works part-time whereas one man in twenty works part-time. Despite the law (introduced in 1999) on equal treatment of men and women regarding access to labour and work conditions, women are often offered part-time work in a limited number of sectors and jobs. There is considerable salary differentiation between men and women deriving from the systems of job description and assessment. Women report that they feel guided into accepting reduced working hours because of the unpaid work-load which falls on them.

Parental leave: Universal paid maternity leave was set at 15 weeks in 1998, with partly-paid leave available for 3 months full-time or 6 months part-time or 15 months time before children are 4 years old. In 2001 some 75 250 mothers (take-up rate not available) availed of this leave. Payments are made through health and invalidity insurance. Data are not available on the uptake of leave by fathers, although all fathers have automatic right to 3 days (private sector) or 4 days (public sector) paid leave taken within 12 days of birth. Since 2002, ten working days of paid paternal leave are available through health and invalidity insurance. In 2002 the system of career breaks (including parental leave) was replaced by a system giving workers the right to a time credit of one year over an entire career, a right granted to all employees. The break can be taken in the form of total suspension of activity or part-time reduction for at least 3 months.

Access and provision

Operational features: Both day care and early education are characterised by mixed public and private provision, funded by the Flemish Government. Normally, day care centres are open 10-12 hours per day and pre-primary schools open daily (half-day Wednesday) from 8.30-15.30, with after-school care if needed.

Early education from 2.5 years is free, with supplementary investments given to schools catering for substantial family diversity. *Kleuterschools* (mainstream pre-primary provision) are operated by the school boards belonging to the different networks, each group being financed or subsidised by the Government.

Despite a great increase in capacity over the past five years the care structure does not yet meet the demand of parents. In 2003, some 65 547 places across crèche and family day care were available (43 874 places in subsidised care and 21 673 places in independent care). Services are mostly used by working mothers in dual-income families, although strategies are in place to balance access for children across the whole community. There is strong uptake by single-parent families.

0-1 years: In the first year, maternal and family care predominates, with 31% of the cohort in licensed public settings. Because tax relief is offered to families who use care supervised by *Kind en Gezin*, the use of non-supervised family day care is not common.

1-3 years: 42% of 1- to 2-year-olds and 32% of 2- to 3-year-olds are in licensed care services. (Children may access a free, full-time place in pre-primary education at 2.5 years). 35.2% of 0- to 3-year-olds are in the full-time care of parents. 34.2% of the 0-3 cohort access licensed care at least part of the day and a further 0.9% access unregulated care. More than 36 000 3-year-olds (over 85% of the 3-year-old cohort) attend pre-primary (infant) school.

2.5-6 years: There is an 85% uptake by 2.5 years old in the first year of free pre-primary school, with from age 3 onwards (98.4% in 1997-98). 11.2% of the 3- to 6-year-old cohort access, in addition, publicly licensed child care settings, and 17.1% access out-of-school care provision. The relative child care and out-of-school care figures for 4- to 5-year-olds are 11.7% and 16.1%, and for 5- to 6-year-olds, 11.6% and 18.2%.

Out-of-school provision: This care operates either as a) publicly licensed initiatives outside the school, or as b) care outside school hours by the school. For the former 11.7% of 4-year-olds, 11.6% of 5-year-olds and 8% of 6-year-olds access this care. For the latter 16.1% of 4-year-olds, 18.2% of 5-year-olds and 19% of 6-year-olds access care at their school (see details in the table below).

	Publicly licensed (initiatives for out-of-school care)	Out-of-school care by school	Total
4 years	11.7	16.1	27.8
5 years	11.6	18.2	29.8
6 years	8.0	19.0	27.0

Children with diverse needs

Attention to children with diverse needs: Accredited providers must give priority to children from single parent families, families with low income, children for whom care is desirable for social or pedagogical reasons and children of parents at work.

Children with disabilities: In Flanders, the tradition has been to support these children at home, but there is growing awareness of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC. Providers receive extra remuneration per child per day and may also receive a structural grant (since 2001) to support and ensure optimum facilities. In subsidised care, the amount of days of stay of children with disabilities increased with 8.5%. Subsequent special education is well funded, though often separate from mainstream provision;

Children from low-income families: Flanders makes significant investments in social exclusion and priority education programmes. The percentage of children born in 2003 into underprivileged families was 5.2% (based on low levels on three or more of the indicators: income, education level, work status, child development, home and health). The child poverty level is 4.3% after redistribution.* The participation of children 3 months to 3 years from underprivileged families is rising. In 2002, 18.8% accessed child care, increasing to

* *Kind en Gezin* defines poverty as a persistent state in which people are restricted in their opportunities to have a satisfactory share of socially highly valued goods such as education, home and work. Six selection criteria are derived from this definition on the basis of which, within Child and Family, it is established whether a family should be regarded as underprivileged: namely the monthly family income, the educational level of the parents, the development of the children, the working situation of the parents, the home and health. If a family scores badly in three or more criteria it is regarded as underprivileged.

21.7% in 2004. Strategies in place to increase the participation of this group include a revision of the parental contribution regulation, which in 2002 lowered the cost of child care for families with an income below the guaranteed minimum monthly salary. In addition accredited providers can also charge a lower social tariff and if necessary even a zero tariff. *Kind en Gezin* guarantees the accredited provider a fixed amount for working costs so that the charging of a low parental contribution does not disadvantage the provider. Since 2004, *Kind en Gezin* subsidises a number of “Neighbourhood and proximity services” to target minority groups.

Ethnic and bilingual children: In Flanders, 17.3% of children speak a language other than Dutch as their mother tongue. 4.4% of the children do not have Belgian nationality. The participation of children 3 months to 3 years from ethnic families is rising. In 2002, 19.6% accessed child care, increasing to 23.7% in 2004. Much effort is being devoted to integrating these children and to ensuring that they receive enhanced educational opportunities (*gelijke onderwijskansenbeleid* – see the section on *Developments* below).

Quality

Licensing and regulatory regimes: Licensing regimes in child care services are varied according to their subsidised or independent status. Subsidised services have to meet minimum quality standards and have to develop a quality handbook in which they describe the procedures of how they evaluate quality, how they engage parents, how child carers are trained. Independent services require registration only, but most of them choose to work under the supervision of *Kind en Gezin*. This means that they have to meet certain quality standards. Both types of services are subject to irregular checks by *Kind en Gezin*.

Funding: Subsidised crèches and family day care services (private and public) have two main sources of income, namely public subsidies and parental fees. In services supervised by *Kind en Gezin*, government subsidies are paid directly to child care providers. A fixed amount for working costs is guaranteed so that the charging of a low parental contribution does not disadvantage the provider. In this case, non-profit bodies have preferred status, receiving higher pro-rata subsidies than independent providers. Parents pay fees according to income. On average, in the subsidised care sector, parental fees amount to 26% of the actual care costs in centre-based care and 60% of costs in family day care. Fully independent providers do not receive a subsidy, and parents pay the full costs. Since 2001, small, independent crèches receive an annual subsidy per place to promote quality and management. In addition, when provision is under the supervision of *Kind en Gezin* (the majority case), tax benefits are granted to parents to recuperate the fees paid to services. The tax-deductibility of child care costs is limited to EUR 11.20 euro per day per child. The federal Parliament recently extended the tax deductibility to children younger than 12 years. Within the educational services, public funding provides 96.1% of costs with private (parental) expenditure contributing the balance. Expenditure on child care and early education from both public and private sources is over 0.1% of GDP.

Staffing: The division between care and education is reflected in the training and status of staff in each sector, although some initiatives are in place to address this. *Kleuterschools* engage *kleuteronderwijzers* (nursery school teachers) whose status parallels that of primary or secondary school teachers. Subsidised child care centres engage certified *kinderverzorgsters* whose training differs (see below) while family day carers in subsidised provision are selected by interview and may subsequently engage in training while in service.

Training requirements: *Kleuteronderwijzers* (nursery school teachers) are trained at tertiary level for three years in teacher training colleges alongside primary and lower secondary teachers. In-service training is well developed in the education sector, and the Ministry of Education devolves substantial funding for training budgets to the level of the school. Outside the education sector, training remains low. In subsidised day care centres, staff are generally trained child care workers (*kinderverzorgster*), who have taken the professional stream in secondary education and are given one further year of specialisation in their field. According to reports, trainees do not receive a strong theoretical base for their future work. Family day carers receive “in-service” training of between 4 to 60 hours only, and need no qualification to be licensed. Afterwards, though regularly visited and guided by service managers, they benefit little from further in-training. In contrast, in-training of child care workers in the subsidised centres is provided within their contractual hours. Overall, the training situation is matter for concern: “only 25% of the child care jobs in Flanders require a diploma or certificate” (Peeters, 2005). *Kind en Gezin* has initiated a discussion on the proper educational requirements in the different services for young children. The most important result of these talks is the document *Beroepsprofiel van de Begeleider Kinderopvang* (Professional Profile of the Child care Worker) that was published by the Flemish Social and Economic Council (SERV) in 2001. The 2002 Quality Decree also stipulates that by 2010, half the child care workforce should have a diploma.

Work conditions: As is usual in split systems, salary and working conditions in the early education sector are correct, with nursery school teachers receiving pay largely equivalent to their colleagues in primary and lower secondary schools. In the social sector, the situation is very different, but improving. In 2003, agreement was reached to give child minders affiliated to a service a limited social statute. Since 2001, new child minders joining the sector receive a start-up allowance for installation costs. Efforts are underway to improve the career structure of child care workers. Since 2000, job profiles have been prepared for assistants and managers in child care services. Acknowledgment of competences acquired outside of formal education (EVC) aims to support the assistants to become certified workers.

Child-staff ratio: The child-staff ratio in regulated family day care is 4:1. Maximum group size is 8. In crèche the ratio is 6.5:1; in accredited out-of-school care 14:1, but a specified group sizes is not obligatory for either group. Providers in crèche may apply their own quality policy regarding maximum numbers of children per assistant. In the *kleuterschool*, government investment to increase staff for the younger children has reduced the child-staff ratio to 18:1 (1997-98), but numbers can be greater or lesser depending on the time of the year.

Curriculum and pedagogy: In Flanders there is no national curriculum. Each school can develop its own curriculum and method of teaching. A set of minimum developmental goals (*ontwikkelingsdoelen*) that are desirable and attainable for children in pre-school was ratified in 1997. All schools work to these goals. The *ontwikkelingsdoelen* emphasise a broad and harmonious approach to education, addressing: personal characteristics – positive self-image, motivation and initiative; general development – being autonomous, communicating and cooperating, determining own direction, creativity and problem solving; and specific skills in selected domains: physical education, expressive arts, language, environmental studies, mathematics. Cross-curricular teaching is stressed to achieve the broad objectives of social competence and lifelong learning skills.

Monitoring, evaluation and research: In 1997 the strategy for stimulating quality changed from one of control to one of information and promotion. Corresponding to this change, research was conducted in 2003, to develop an assessment instrument for the measurement of the experience and perceptions of the children 0-12 years. Further refinements of the process are underway. Monitoring processes for family day care and crèche reflect wide variation across the sector. *Kind en Gezin* is a three-fold approach to quality (determining, monitoring and stimulating). Minimum levels are determined in consultation with the sector. In the future, monitoring will be managed by a separate inspection agency following a new decree passed in 2004. For the moment, inspection is still part of *Kind en Gezin*. In the infant school, inspection is carried out by education inspectors, generally on a whole school basis.

Parent and community involvement as partners in child care is promoted. A quality decree for the subsidised services asks for users to be informed and involved in the service, and to assist in monitoring, and controlling the quality policy. Providers have to describe how parental involvement is established and how they deal with complaints from parents. They also have to describe how parental satisfaction is measured. A web-site on child care supports parents to choose quality care, understand the different types of care available, and survey the cost of care. This development is aimed at supporting parents to choose care from an informed base and to progress the quality of care available.

Community involvement is established by the creation of local consultative groups. These groups comprise all those involved in child care in one way or another (providers, parents and policy makers). The aim is to develop a local policy plan, to advise on the establishment of child care initiatives in the local authority and to create a permanent consultative structure through annual evaluation of the local care situation and of the policy plan. In education a new decree on participation (also parental participation) has come into force since September 2004.

Developments

Developments in the area of inclusion and social cohesion: In recent years, Flemish society has become increasingly multicultural, and there is growing public awareness of immigrant issues, poverty and the need for greater equality. Between 1995 and 1998, *Kind en Gezin* and the Research Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (VBJK) set up a training and employment programme for women from ethnic minorities supported by the European NOW initiative. The project trained with success 25 women from ethnic minorities and all of them found a job in the Flemish day care centres. This project is now influencing ECEC recruitment policies in the large cities. Between 1999 and 2004, in collaboration with the European DECET Network (Diversity in Early Childhood care Education and Training), several diversity projects have been set up in Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp. According to the 2002 Quality Decree, ethnic, as well as gender diversity in the Initiatives for Out-of-school Care workforce represents an important condition for licensing. Diversity is no longer an option; facilities need to demonstrate that they are taking specific steps to ensure that their workforce reflects the ethnic mix in the neighbourhood, and that they have tried to recruit male employees.

Child poverty levels have also been reduced, and a main policy concern is to make regular care and early education accessible to all children who need it, irrespective of their family situation, their socio-economic background or their ethnic origin. Demand for child care has grown rapidly in the past five years. In education, the Equal Education

Opportunities Decree of 2002 aims at giving each child as many opportunities as possible. Each child can enrol in the school of the parents' choice, and schools receive extra teaching hours when the children enrolled come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recently, elementary schools have been provided with care co-ordinators, who support the regular staff in supporting children with learning challenges. Several innovative programmes have been initiated, such as the Freinet schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Ghent. These schools are developing diversity pedagogy with the parents from ethnic minorities and in consultation with the children (De Meyer, 2005, *Social Disadvantage: The Ghent Projects*, Pedagogische Begeleidingsdienst, Ghent).

Developments in the area of quality: A continuing quality challenge for ECEC in Flanders has been the relatively low government investment in professionals caring for young children, and the choice, during the 1980s and 90s, of low cost (in the short term) forms of child care and out-of-school provision (OSP). Much of the quality work in the last decade have been efforts to palliate for the inherent weaknesses of a large, poorly-qualified family day sector, a new (and fast-growing) commercial mini-crèche sector for which only a low vocational child care worker diploma is needed, and under-invested child care and out-of-school provision (OSP).

In 2001 the government proposed a more participative quality system that after long consultation with the sector was introduced in 2004. In the new approach, quality is seen as an ongoing construction, jointly determined by parents, the child care workers, the children and the management board of centres (Peeters, 2005). In addition, processes of local consultation designed to stimulate the quality of care are underway, focusing on out-of-school care, care outside office hours, emergency care and sick care. As policy is moving in the direction of de-regulation, ways are being sought to integrate consultation into policy development in order to achieve more strategic and integrated local care policies. Much effort is being invested in professional development, especially to promote management that is more effective. An additional subsidy is given to centres for management work and logistics, based on *per capita* enrolments.

The universities and training centres (though the VBJK, the tri-partite university Training and Resource Centre for Child Care) focus on including child care as a pedagogical discipline in higher education, giving special attention to diversity. In the larger cities, e.g. Antwerp, Ghent, local governments have brought the day care facilities under the responsibility of the alderman of the department of education. Crèches collaborate closely with local infant schools to ensure smooth transitions for children and families from one service to another. In this initiative, staff can move from the crèche to the school. The introduction of child care workers into pre-primary education is expected to enhance collaboration and increase integration of programmes and services.

The whole system is moving towards a coherent national quality system (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2004, "Diversity and Equity in Early Childhood Training in Europe", DECET Network, Ghent), but is still significantly under-financed. In 1992, *Kind en Gezin* introduced national quality scales for pedagogical functioning in all subsidised day care centres in Flanders based on the ITERS and ECERS quality scales. The impact on the daily practice in the centres of the introduction of these national pedagogical standards led to much improvement, with care settings becoming more educational and stimulating for infants and toddlers. In 2004, the agency and the Ministry of Education promoted the use of the *Experiential Education* scales developed by Prof. Ferre Laevers from the University of

Leuven. These scales focus on children and provide a simple measure of their well-being and involvement in the centre or classroom. Centres are very positive about these self-evaluation scales as they provide concrete guidelines on how to increase pedagogical quality and change daily practice.

In the education sector, efforts are also being made to reduce child-staff ratios, and to introduce a greater degree of care for the younger children. For this reason, a regulation is now in force to employ one *kinderverzorgster* (child carer) in all the first year classes of the *Kleuterschool*. Another important policy orientation is to bring pre-primary (the *kleuterschool*) and school closer together, to make basic education a cohesive unity. Goals are elaborated in the “Developmental Objectives” or minimum goals (knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes) that are considered desirable and attainable by children in primary and pre-primary classes. At the same time, there is widespread recognition that pre-primary has its own specificity, that of developing the total personality of the children.