



Access to early childhood education and care in Europe 2022/2023

Eurydice – Facts and Figures

Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe – 2023

Ensuring access to ECEC is a primary concern of national and European Union decision-makers when developing policies for young children and their parents. The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) established the right to affordable ECEC of good quality for all children. However, this right is not yet enshrined in the legislation of many Member States.

Place guarantee: two ways of ensuring the right to ECEC

Currently, in Europe, there are two approaches to ensuring universal access to ECEC. Some countries provide a **legal entitlement** to an ECEC place, while others make ECEC attendance **compulsory**. Each approach requires public authorities to commit to guaranteeing a place in ECEC. However, there are some fundamental differences.

A legal entitlement means a child has a right to ECEC, but when it is compulsory, a child has a legal obligation to attend. The nature of the place guarantee therefore differs. Under the legal entitlement, public authorities have to guarantee a place for any child in the age range covered whose parents request it.

In contrast, in countries where ECEC is compulsory, public authorities must guarantee a sufficient number of places for all children in the age range covered by the legal obligation.

To provide an overview, Figure 1 groups both these access measures together and shows the earliest age from which a place guarantee is available: either as a legal entitlement or compulsory ECEC (detailed breakdown is displayed in Figure 2). The map reveals significant differences in the age at which children have a guaranteed place in ECEC in Europe. Only seven EU Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) as well as Norway guarantee a place in ECEC for each child from an early age (6–18 months), often immediately after the end of childcare leave (see Figure 2). A place in publicly subsidised ECEC is guaranteed from the age of 3 years or a little earlier in the three Communities of Belgium and in Czechia, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland and Portugal. Around a third of European countries guarantee a place only for the last 1–2 years of ECEC.

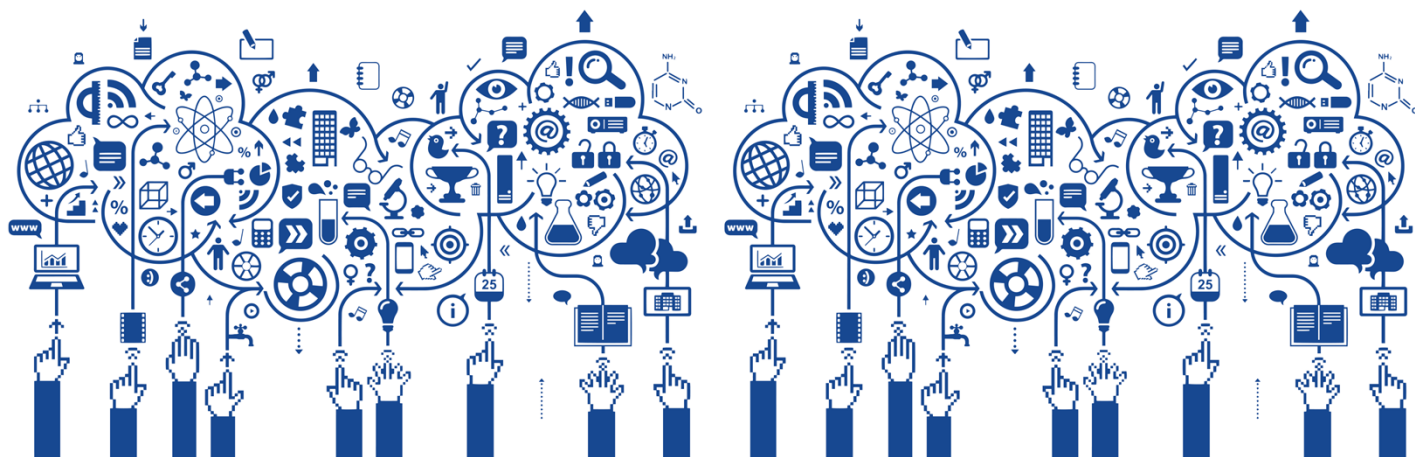
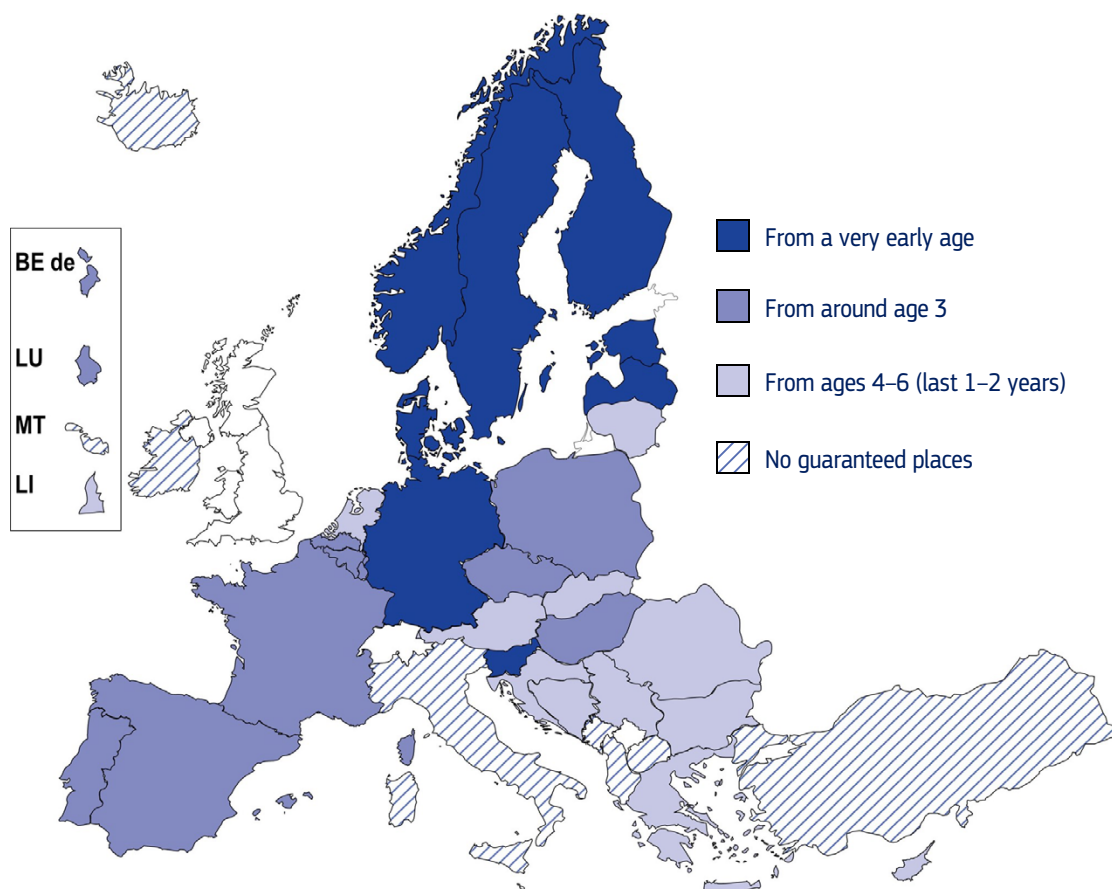


Figure 1: Age from which a place in ECEC is guaranteed, 2022/2023



Source: Eurydice.

Country-specific note

Portugal: since the extension of legal entitlement from age 4 to age 3 in 2018, demand has still not been met in some large cities.

Few European countries have no legal framework to ensure a place in ECEC. Only three EU Member States (Ireland, Italy and Malta) have not formally established legal entitlement or compulsory ECEC. In practice, places are available in these countries from around age 3.

For example, in Italy and Malta, the majority of ECEC centres for children from age 3 are combined with primary schools and are therefore considered as an integral part of the education system. Ireland offers a universal free early childhood care and education programme of 15 weekly hours from around this age.

In Iceland, demand meets supply from an earlier age. The right to ECEC is widely described in laws and regulations without referring to a specific age or number of hours, but the participation rates in ISCED 0 are very high from age 2.

In contrast, the absence of a legal place guarantee is reflected in the lower availability of ECEC in Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Türkiye.

Gap between childcare leave and place guarantee in ECEC

The policies governing support for families with babies and young children are complex and are often interlinked. Therefore, when considering the differences in the starting age of the guaranteed place in ECEC, it is important to take into account another important family policy measure, namely the length of childcare leave.

The length of 'well-paid' childcare leave (later in text 'childcare leave') varies greatly in Europe. The data from the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (Koslowski et al., 2022) reveals that almost half of European countries provide an opportunity for families to stay off work and raise their children for around 1 year or more. Families may take care of their children without facing financial risk up to 2 years after their birth in Czechia, Hungary and Romania. Estonia comes next, with the childcare leave available up until the child reaches 1.5 years of age. In contrast, more than a quarter of European countries provide well-paid childcare leave for less than 5 months. Notably, in Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina, no period of leave is paid at a high earnings-related level.

In order to show the degree of separation between the policies, the **ECEC gap** indicates the amount of time a child is not covered either by childcare leave or a guaranteed place in ECEC. This is the period when families with young children have to make difficult decisions about whether to stay at home, whether to turn to informal care, or whether and how to pay for expensive, private ECEC.

Figure 2 shows the difference between the end of the maximum childcare leave and the earliest start of the universal place guarantee in ECEC. The European countries are listed according to the length of the ECEC gap. At the left side, where no gap is indicated, are the countries with well-coordinated childcare leave and ECEC policies. Only six EU Member States (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden), along with Norway, have no ECEC gap. All these even have some overlap, where parents are still

entitled to childcare leave but a place in publicly subsidised ECEC provision is already guaranteed. The overlap offers families flexibility during the transition to ECEC. Countries with no ECEC gap grant long childcare leave (on average 13 months) and have unitary ECEC systems providing a legal right to a subsidised, but not free place.

When there is an ECEC gap, it lasts for a minimum of 1 and maximum of 6 years. The difference between the well-paid childcare leave and the start of the legal entitlement is between 1 and 2 years in Czechia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary and Poland. Most of these countries grant long, well-paid childcare leave (1–2 years) and a guarantee to an ECEC place from age 3. Latvia features as an exception.

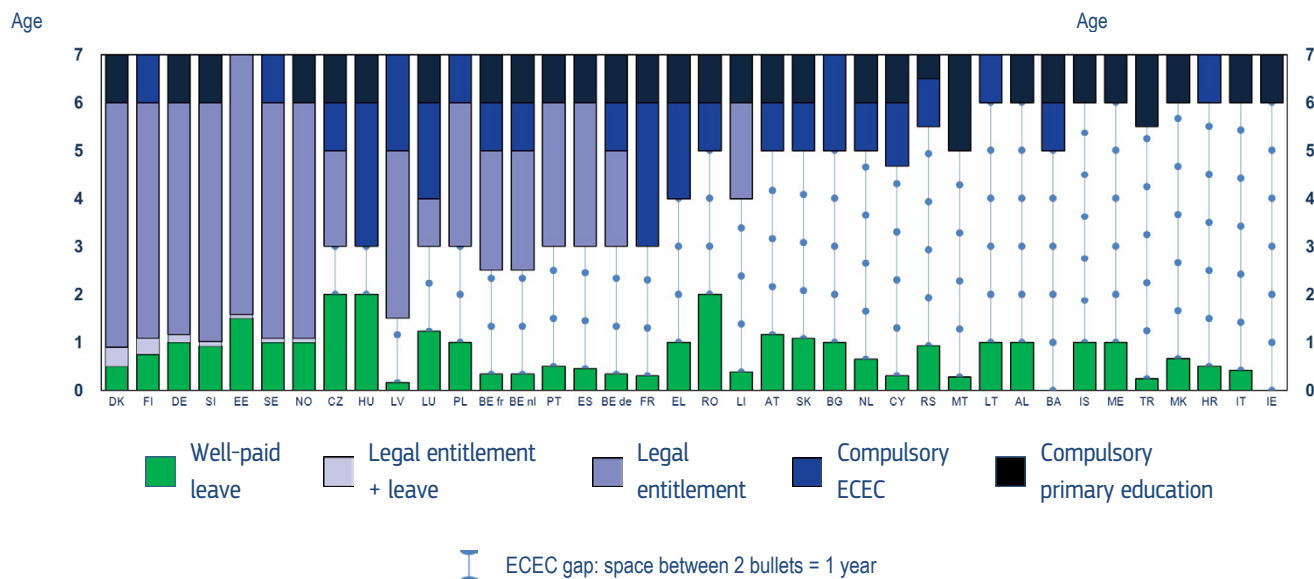
In **Latvia**, the universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised ECEC starts at age 1.5. Maternity leave with an allowance of 80 % of previous earnings is granted for 16 weeks. Afterwards, a parental allowance is made available with two options: until the child is 1 year old with 60 % of the previous salary allowance; or until the child is

1.5 years old with 44 % of the previous salary allowance. In addition, a person caring for a child up to 1.5 years of age receives a childcare allowance (EUR 171 per month).

The ECEC gap is between 2 and 3 years in Belgium, Spain, France and Portugal. These countries offer a relatively short period of childcare leave (4–6 months) but guarantee a place in ECEC from around age 3 or earlier.

In the remaining countries, the period with no childcare leave and no entitlement to ECEC lasts 3 years or longer. From the legal rights point of view, 10 European countries have an ECEC gap of 5–6 years: Ireland, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Türkiye. Most of the countries with a long childcare gap have either no guarantee to an ECEC place or have only 1–2 years of compulsory ECEC before the start of primary education. However, as already discussed, the childcare gap might be *de facto* shorter, as publicly subsidised ECEC is almost universally available from around age 3–4 without a legal entitlement *de jure*.

Figure 2: Gap between childcare leave and place guarantee in ECEC, 2022/2023



Source: Eurydice.

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU
Leave	0.3	0.3	0.3	1	2	0.9	1.2	1.6	-	1	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.2	1	1.2	2
Legal entitlement	2.5	3	2.5	-	3	0.5	1	1.5	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	1.5	-	3	-
Compulsory ECEC	5	5	5	5	5	-	-	-	-	4	-	3	6	-	4.7	5	6	4	3
Compulsory primary	6	6	6	7	6	6	6	7	6	6	6	6	7	6	6	7	7	6	6

	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	AL	BA	IS	LI	ME	MK	NO	RS	TR
Leave	0.3	0.7	1.2	1	0.5	2	1	1.1	1.1	1.1	1	-	1	0.4	1	0.7	1.1	0.9	0.3
Legal entitlement	-	-	-	3	3	-	0.9	-	0.8	1	-	-	-	4	-	-	1	-	-
Compulsory ECEC	-	5	5	6	-	5	-	5	6	6	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	5.5	-
Compulsory primary	5	6	6	7	6	6	6	6	7	7	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6.5	5.5

Explanatory note

The ECEC gap is the difference between the maximum length of well-paid leave and the earliest start of a universal place guarantee in ECEC (legal entitlement or compulsory ECEC). When there is no guaranteed place in ECEC, the gap is calculated until the start of compulsory primary education. Most of the data on well-paid leave comes from the International Network on Leave Policies and Research and refers to April 2022. It includes post-natal maternity, paternity and parental leaves. ‘Well-paid’ means earnings-related payment at 66 % of earnings or above. The total amount of ‘well-paid’ leave available to parents expressed in child’s age in months (Koslowski et al., 2022, pp. 53–58) was converted to years by dividing the number by 12.

Country-specific notes

Albania, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia: leave data provided by Eurydice.

The Netherlands: the [new regulation](#) in force since August 2022 increased the well-paid leave to 34 weeks.

Portugal: since the extension of the legal entitlement from age 4 to age 3 in 2018, demand has still not been met in some large cities.

Finland: the family leave system reform entered into force in August 2022, increasing the total length of well-paid leave from 12 to approximately 13 months. The figure and table show the most [recent regulations](#).

Bosnia and Herzegovina: ECEC in the year before starting primary school is mandatory in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the Republic of Srpska, ECEC is not compulsory, but all children attend a 3-month pre-primary programme nevertheless.

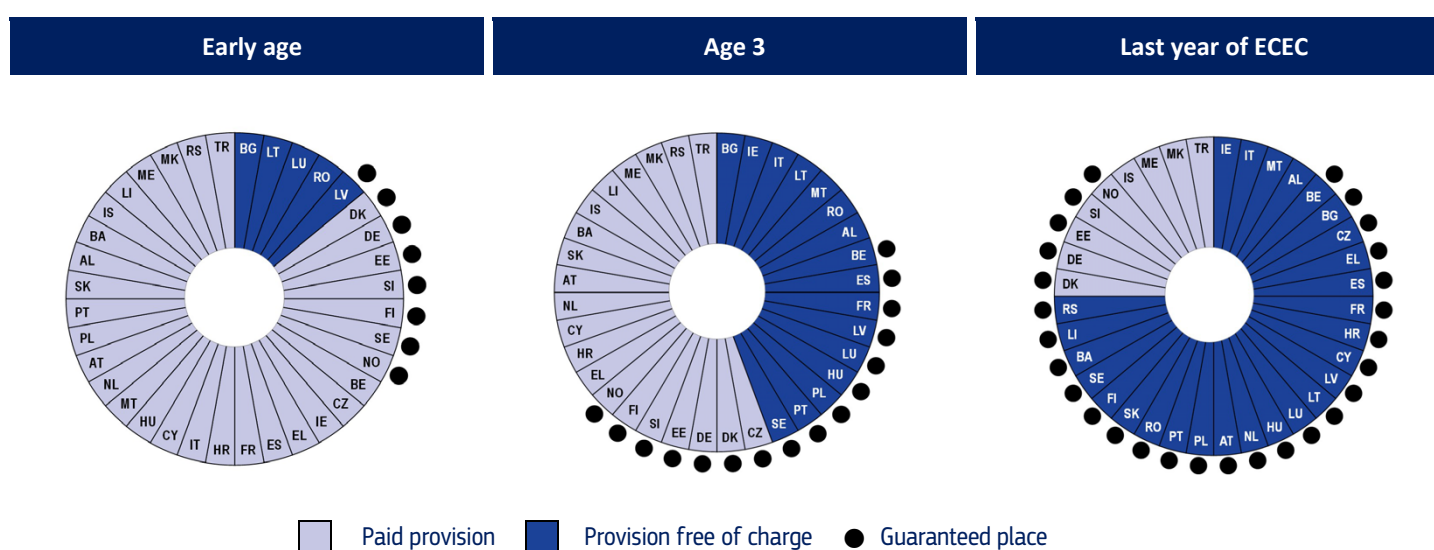
Free of charge ECEC

Affordability is a very important factor in ensuring that the highest possible number of children have access to ECEC. Figure 3 examines the most robust measure taken to ensure that every family can afford to place their child in ECEC, where all places are offered free of charge. However, affordability must be discussed in relation to availability, since without a place guarantee, free ECEC in public settings

may be limited and waiting lists may be long with complex priority rules. Therefore, Figure 3 shows the availability of free ECEC in relation to a guaranteed place for three broad age groups:

1. early age (under age 2);
2. around age 3 (more than age 2, less than age 4);
3. last year of ECEC (age 4, 5 or 6, which varies by education system).

Figure 3: ECEC free of charge and guaranteed places, 2022/2023



Starting age of ECEC free of charge and the number of free of charge hours per week

	BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	HR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU
Age (years)	2.5	3	2.5	0.3	5	-	⊗	-	2.7	4	3	3	6	3	4.7	1.5	0	1	3
Weekly hours	23	23	23	Δ	Δ	-	⊗	-	15	Δ	25	24	(4-7)	Δ	Δ	⊗	20	20-26	Δ
	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	AL	BA	IS	LI	ME	MK	NO	RS	TR
Age (years)	2.75	4	5	3	3	0	-	5	6	3	3	5	-	4	-	-	-	5.5	-
Weekly hours	30	25	20	25	25	Δ	-	Δ	20	(15)	20	(4-5)	-	21	-	-	-	Δ	-

⊗ No top-level regulations Δ No restrictions (full day)

Source: Eurydice.

Explanatory note

In the table, when the weekly hours are shown in brackets, the number is the approximate weekly value.

Country-specific notes

Germany: Berlin, Hamburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern offer free ECEC for all children. In Rhineland-Palatina, ECEC is free from the age of 2. Bremen, Hessen and Niedersachsen waive the fees from age 3. North Rhine-Westphalia and Thuringia offer free ECEC for all children during the final 2 years, while Brandenburg offers free ECEC during the final year before starting primary education. ECEC is not free of charge in Baden-Württemberg, Bayern, Saarland, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Schleswig-Holstein.

Portugal: currently, a gradual extension of free-of-charge ECEC for all children is being introduced. From 1 September 2022, there are no fees for all children entering the first year of crèche. In 2023, this measure will be extended all children entering the first year of crèche and proceeding to the second year. In 2024, all children will attend ECEC free-of-charge. See [Law No 2/2022, 3 January](#).

In Europe, most families pay fees for ECEC for the youngest group of children. The availability of ECEC free of charge increases noticeably at age 3, and this trend continues with each year of age, becoming almost universal across Europe during the last year before primary education starts. Free public ECEC for all children from the earliest years is offered in five countries: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Romania. Latvia is the only European country that guarantees a free public ECEC place from as early as 1.5-years-old.

In **Latvia**, if a place in an educational institution run by the local government is not offered and the child attends a preschool educational programme in a private educational institution, the local government must cover some of the costs of the private service provider. The costs covered correspond to the average cost of a child on a pre-primary education programme at the local government educational institution ([Education Law](#), Section 17).

In the four other countries (Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Lithuania and Romania), there is no legal guarantee to ensure the availability of free ECEC from an early age. Lithuania and Luxembourg offer free ECEC for 20 hours per week, while Bulgaria and Romania fund free full-time places.

In **Bulgaria**, the collection of fees in the ECEC sector was abolished in April 2022.

In **Lithuania**, the state offers free ECEC for 20 hours per week. If the child attends for longer than 20 hours per week, parents (guardians) pay for the additional hours. Parents (guardians) also pay for the child's meals. From 2020–2021, all 6-year-olds attending compulsory pre-primary classes are provided with a free lunch.

In **Luxembourg**, since 1 October 2017 children aged 1 to 4 may benefit from 20 hours of free child-care in the non-formal education sector (*service d'éducation et d'accueil*). Fees for additional hours are charged. From age 3, the preschool programme lasts 26 weekly hours (*éducation précoce et éducation préscolaire*) and is free of charge.

In **Romania**, ECEC is free of charge for both the normal (10 hours per day) and the short programme (5 hours per day).

In the remaining European countries, either all or some parents pay fees for ECEC in the earliest years, although the costs vary considerably between countries (see [Key Data on ECEC](#), 2019). From around age 3, almost half of European countries offer free ECEC. In many countries, this is a period of transition when children change from a childcare-type to an education-type setting. Most of these countries combine free ECEC with a place guarantee (Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Poland and Portugal).

For the last year of ECEC, the distribution of free and fee-paying ECEC provision is reversed compared with the earliest years. Most European countries offer at least 1 year of free pre-primary education. The exceptions are Denmark, seven *Länder* in Germany, Estonia, Slovenia, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway and Türkiye, where some parents contribute to costs during the entire period when their child attends ECEC.

Many countries have been extending the universal place guarantee in ECEC

Since 2014/2015, when the structural indicators on ECEC were first gathered, there have been substantial changes in the **legal framework that guarantees access** to ECEC in several EU Member States. Eight countries have introduced compulsory ECEC for 1 year prior to starting primary education, and another three countries have prolonged the period of mandatory attendance to 2–3 years. Moreover, a few countries are extending the ages of the legal right to ECEC for every child.

Attending the last year of ECEC has been made **compulsory** in Belgium (since September 2020), Czechia (2017), Croatia (2014), Lithuania (2016), Romania (2020), Slovakia (2021), Finland (2015) and Sweden (2018).

Three countries have made compulsory attendance longer than 1 year. In Hungary, ECEC has been compulsory for children from the age of 3 since September 2015. In France, the starting age of compulsory education has been lowered from age 6 to 3 since September 2019. Greece has gradually lowered the starting age of compulsory pre-primary school attendance from age 5 to age 4 (2021). Bulgaria is progressively introducing compulsory education for 4-year-olds (with the aim of this being implemented in all municipalities by 2023–2024). Cyprus is planning to establish compulsory education for 4-year-olds from 2025. In Romania, the age of compulsory ECEC will be extended to 4-year-olds from September 2023.

A **legal entitlement** to ECEC has been introduced or extended in Czechia, Poland and Portugal. These countries have imposed a statutory duty on ECEC providers in a catchment area to secure publicly subsidised ECEC for all children of a certain age whose parents request a place. Czechia and Poland have been gradually extending the entitlement to age 3 (fully implemented in Poland from 2017 and in Czechia from 2018). Portugal lowered the start of universal preschool education (ISCED level 020) to age 3

from September 2018, and a strategy was implemented adjust the preschool network to parents' needs. A gradual expansion of the universal guarantee to preschool education has been adopted in Lithuania. According to this plan, 4-year-olds will have a place guaranteed from September 2023, and this will be lowered to 2-year-olds in 2025. In Slovakia the preparation of legal entitlement for 4-year-olds since 2024 and 3-year-olds since 2025 is under way.

Several countries have reforms concerning the starting age of primary education, which in turn affects the total length of the ECEC period. In 2020, Cyprus raised the primary education age to 6 years. Consequently, the length of compulsory ECEC was extended to 1 year and 4 months ⁽¹⁾. Sweden has launched a government inquiry on whether to introduce a 10-year primary school by changing the preschool class (last year of compulsory ECEC) to year 1 of primary education. If the government decides to implement this, it will be applicable from 2026 ⁽²⁾.

Overall, data reveal that compulsory ECEC has become a more common measure than the entitlement to it. A legal right to a place in ECEC is currently granted in 15 European countries, while ECEC is compulsory in 20 countries. A few education systems provide both a legal entitlement to ECEC and compulsory ECEC. In Belgium, Czechia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Finland and Sweden, children have a right to get a place in ECEC from around age 3, but all children must attend ECEC during the last 1–2 years before the start of primary education.

Definitions

In this analysis, **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** refers to provision for children from birth through to compulsory primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e. which must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. The definition goes beyond the education programmes classified as International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 0 (early childhood education), as it includes all registered and regulated ECEC services. This fact-sheet, however, covers only centre-based ECEC. Home-based ECEC (childminding service or family daycare) that is usually delivered in a provider's home or other home-like places is not with the scope. Individual care which occurs in the child's own home (e.g. live-in and live-out nannies and babysitters, care of relatives) is also not included.

Compulsory ECEC refers to the legal obligation for children to attend ECEC when they reach a certain age.

Free of charge means that no payment is expected for normal educational and care activities. However, a fee may be still be payable for meals taken during the session, transport to the setting, additional hours of provision and/or extra activities (e.g. English tuition, swimming).

Legal entitlement to ECEC refers to a statutory duty on ECEC providers to secure publicly subsidised ECEC provision for all children living in a catchment area whose parents, regardless of their employment, socioeconomic or family status, require a place for their child.

Well-paid leave includes post-natal maternity, paternity and parental leaves. 'Well-paid' means earnings-related payment at 66 % of earnings or above.

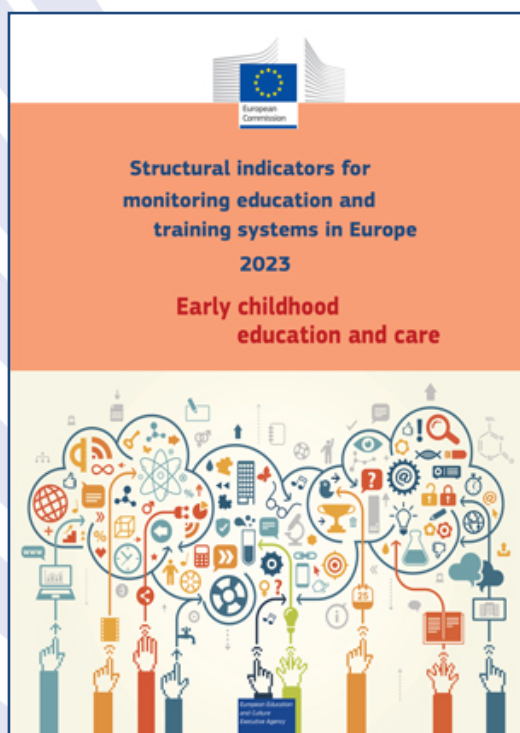
⁽¹⁾ Decision nr: 84.078, date of publication: 09.01.2018, see [http://www.cm.gov.cy/cm/cm.nsf/All/8BE7AAD0082913CAC22583E5002AC80D/\\$file/84.078.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.cm.gov.cy/cm/cm.nsf/All/8BE7AAD0082913CAC22583E5002AC80D/$file/84.078.pdf?OpenElement).

⁽²⁾ 'A ten-year compulsory school – Introduction of a new Year 1 in compulsory school, compulsory school for pupils with learning disabilities, compulsory special needs school and Sami school, SOU 2021:33', see <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/f0785293473f4488ad7132aa06fbb1a1/en-tioarig-grundskola-sou-202133/>.

Access to early childhood education and care in Europe 2022/2023

This fact sheet explains a few main aspects of the situation in Europe regarding the right to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children. It reveals large variations between European countries regarding the public commitment to provide a place in ECEC.

This covers all EU Member States, as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Türkiye.



More information on ECEC systems in Europe is available in the full report: [Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe – 2023](#)

Please also consult the [national descriptions](#) of each European education system.

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