

# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

*A Children in Europe Policy paper (English version)*



Today, across Europe, there is widespread recognition of the need for services for young children and their families. International organisations, including the European Union, different levels of government, social partners, NGOs and many parents call for services. But what services? On what principles and values should they be based? Is this a matter purely for member states at national and local level? Or does more need to be done at an EU level? And, if so, what action is needed? Is there a need for a European approach to services for young children? These questions are addressed in this paper.

**Children in Europe** is a network of national magazines that have joined together to produce a unique magazine: unique because it is published in 13 European countries and 11 European languages. **Children in Europe** writes about services for young children and their families, and it is for all people and organisations concerned with these services and children's issues. **Children in Europe's** aims include the creation of a forum – a 'European space' - for the exchange of ideas, practice and information and contributing to the development of policy and practice at European and national levels. This Policy paper, prepared by the Editorial Board of **Children in Europe**, is intended to stimulate a democratic dialogue about European policy and the need for a European approach to services for young children, and so to support the creation of a European politics of childhood.

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## The case for a European approach to services for young children

### 1. The European Union shares responsibility

**Children in Europe** believes the search for a European approach to services for young children is justified for three reasons. First, because the European Union has a responsibility for these services and the children attending them, alongside national, regional and local levels of government. Services for young children have for many years been an important part of the EU's social and economic policy, as a means to achieve employment and gender equality objectives. In particular, the EU has focused on 'childcare services' for working parents. Most recently, member states governments meeting in Barcelona in 2002 agreed targets for 'childcare' places: 33 percent for children from birth to 3 years and 90 percent for 3 to 6 year olds. But these quantitative targets were not accompanied by any qualitative conditions; member states are left to pursue the Barcelona targets "in line with (national) patterns of provision".

**Children in Europe** contends that the EU's long-standing policy goal of more childcare places gives it a *de facto* responsibility for services for young children and for the children attending them. But recently, the EU has assumed a *de jure* responsibility through the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union by the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission at the European Council meeting in Nice on 7 December 2000. Article 24 of this Charter recognises that "in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration".

In July 2006, the European Commission issued an important Communication, *Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* (COM (2006) 367 final). This proposes "to establish a comprehensive EU strategy to effectively promote and safeguard the rights of the child in the EU's internal and external policies". It affirms that children's rights are "a priority for the EU". This commitment has been reaffirmed in the draft Treaty of Lisbon to reform the EU, agreed by member state leaders in October 2007, in which "the protection of the rights of the child" is specified as an aim of the EU (CIG 14/07; Article 2 (3)).

One other EU policy development should be mentioned. As well as a long-term priority given to 'childcare' and a recent recognition of children's rights, the EU has expressed an interest in early childhood education. In a recent Communication *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems* (COM (2006) 481 final), the EC concludes that "pre-primary education has the highest returns [of any form of education] in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children". It goes on to propose that "member states should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels".

This widening European policy interest requires an approach to services for young children that goes beyond the Barcelona targets. These quantitative targets need to be matched by a clear statement of values and principles on which services should be based, explicitly concerned with children's rights and best interests, and constituting a European approach to services for young children. Moreover, the approach needs to get beyond childcare, adopting an inclusive concept of services open to all children and families and providing for many purposes - certainly 'childcare', but much also besides including education, family support, social inclusion and democratic practice.

**Children in Europe** welcomes the widening EU interest in young children and their services. It hopes the EU's next step will be to cross the borders between policy areas, to join up children's rights, early education, childcare and gender equality.

## 2. Children are citizens of Europe

The second reason for a European approach to services for young children, closely related to the first, is an equity issue. **Children in Europe** believes that to specify quantitative policy targets (as in the Barcelona targets) without specifying more qualitative targets is not only a dereliction of responsibility by the EU. It also exposes children across Europe to unequal conditions. Children as citizens of Europe should expect certain common entitlements and shared benefits: these entitlements and benefits should not depend on where a child happens to have been born.

## 3. The added value of a European approach

Thirdly, **Children in Europe** believes that the search for a European approach can be of mutual benefit to all member states, providing an opportunity for all to gain from the varied and rich traditions and experiences across Europe. The creation of a European approach will provide many opportunities for member states to learn with each other, and to develop and exploit a 'European space' for exchange, dialogue and reflection.

## What is a European approach?

What does **Children in Europe** mean when it speaks of a 'European approach'? We are proposing the *provisional* definition of a relationship between coherence and diversity: this means some common objectives, principles and entitlements but also many differences remaining, both between and within countries. Finding a relationship between coherence and diversity is central to many developments today, both within the EU itself and within many of its member states, especially those which have moved towards more decentralised forms of government. What should be centrally determined, to ensure all citizens their common rights? And what should be left to local autonomy, to reflect the particular needs and wishes of different communities?

A European approach does *not* mean a detailed and all-embracing specification, moving all member states over time to a standardised system of Euro-nurseries or Euro-kindergartens. Nor does it mean a final statement. **Children in Europe** cannot imagine a time when the relationship between coherence and diversity is finalised – which is why we speak of a '*provisional* definition of a relationship'. It is a highly political subject, and thus open to constant debate and change. Even in those areas where the need for 'coherence' is agreed, there may still be scope for considerable difference of interpretation – what we might term diversity-in-coherence! It might, for example, be agreed that all services for young children would benefit from a curriculum – but the scope, specificity and form of that curriculum might (as today) vary widely from country to country.

So in undertaking this exercise of proposing a European approach, **Children in Europe** is drawing services for young children into a long-running and wide-ranging debate, in which there is room for major differences of opinion. We welcome dialogue with those who disagree with the relationship we have proposed.

## What are 'services for young children'?

By this term **Children in Europe** covers a wide range of services for children from birth to compulsory school age, which varies from 4 to 7 years among member states but is most commonly 6. These services come with many different names. Each name in each language embodies a particular and rich mix of traditions, values and understandings – for example, *école maternelle*, *scuola dell'infanzia*, *kindergarten*, *nursery*, *förskola*, *crèche collectif*, *children's centre*. Choose any one of these national names as shorthand for the whole wide range of European

services, and this diversity is rendered invisible, while misunderstandings of what is meant proliferate. We have, therefore, settled for a rather bland term – ‘services for young children’ – which is not associated with any particular country or tradition.

What is covered by this term ‘services for young children’? In the first place, we mean services for groups of children below compulsory school age provided by formal organisations, which may range from a municipality to a parent cooperative to a business, and with at least some paid workers. So we include services such as nurseries, crèches, kindergartens, non-compulsory schools, children’s centres and organised family day care (that is where family day carers work as part of a wider organisation, such as a network, a bureau or a municipality). In most of these services, children spend part or most of their time without their parents being present; but we do not wish to exclude services where some or most parents remain with their children (for example, Maison Vertes in France, Spazio Insieme in Italy).

We do not include services for children of compulsory school age in this paper. **Children in Europe** intends to consider them in a future document. But we do emphasise the importance of the relationship between services for young children and compulsory schools. In particular, we want to avoid the increasing danger of the latter dominating the former. Instead, we support the ideal put forward by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its *Starting Strong* reports (see below) of a ‘strong and equal partnership’ in which neither dominates the other but both are in dialogue and open to new ideas.

## Building on past work: the basis for a European approach

In this consultation paper **Children in Europe** argues the case for a European approach and sets out ten principles that might form the basis for this approach. These principles have not been arbitrarily selected. They build upon earlier work by politicians, policy makers and experts.

Our foundation stone is the *Recommendation on Child Care* (92/241/EEC, approved 31 March 1992), adopted by the Council of Ministers in March 1992 as part of the EU’s Third Equal Opportunities Programme. This is a statement of common political principles and objectives, agreed by (then) member state governments, “to enable women and men to reconcile their occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children” (Article 1). It proposes a package of measures covering: services, leave policies, workplaces, and actions to encourage men to assume more responsibility for children.

Like the Barcelona targets (which make no reference to this earlier policy statement), the *Recommendation on Child Care* adopts the narrow term of ‘child care services’, reflecting its origins in European policies concerned primarily with employment and gender equality (both, we emphasise, important objectives). But the Recommendation takes a broader and deeper perspective. It recognises that “it is essential to promote the well-being of children and families, ensuring that their various needs are met”. It proposes a range of qualitative principles that should guide the development of services: affordability; access in all areas, both urban and rural; access for children with special needs; combining safe and secure care with a pedagogical approach; close and responsive relations between services, parents and local communities; diversity and flexibility; increased choice for parents; coherence between different services. Note here the juxtaposition of both diversity and coherence, though the Recommendation does not define the relationship between them.

The Recommendation was followed by *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*, published by the European Commission Childcare Network in 1996. The Network was an expert group drawn from all member states, established and supported by the European Commission as part of its equal opportunities programme. It produced a wide range of studies and reports between 1986 and

1996. Asked by the European Commission to “establish criteria for the definition of quality in childcare services”, the Network started from the principles set out in the Council Recommendation, and framed 40 targets that it argued were achievable by all member states over a 10 year period. Achievement of these targets would ensure real progress had been made towards the implementation of the Recommendation – although the document emphasised that the targets were not the last word on quality, about which “there can be no final and static view”. Furthermore, achieving the targets would mean partial, not complete, implementation of the Recommendation, since defining the targets involved a judgement of what was feasible in a limited time period. The targets are organised into nine areas: Policy; Finance; Levels and Types of Services; Education; Staff Child Ratios; Staff Employment and Training; Environment and Health; Parents and Community; and Performance. The document stresses that the targets are inter-dependent and form a totality: “taking any one of them in isolation may be meaningless and misleading”.

Though never adopted by the European Commission, *Quality Targets* has been widely distributed, discussed and cited. It remains a unique example of a multi-national group in this field negotiating a relationship between coherence and diversity.

Reference has already been made to recent European documents that refer explicitly to the need for the EU to give “primary consideration” to the child’s best interests in all actions relating to children and to promote and protect the rights of the child. Though they do not refer explicitly to services for young children, ***Children in Europe*** considers these documents to be an important part of the base on which a European approach should be built, providing a clear recognition of the need to take account of children as citizens with rights.

***Children in Europe*** has also drawn on three other documents of great importance, though none is from an EU source. The OECD has undertaken the broadest and most systematic cross-national study of services for young children, covering 20 of its member states, most but not all in Europe. The two reports of this thematic review of early childhood education and care (*Starting Strong*, published in 2001, and *Starting Strong II*, published in 2006) include not only invaluable information and insights, but a number of “key policy elements of successful ECEC (early childhood education and care) policy”, including: a systematic and integrated approach to policy; a strong and equal partnership between early childhood services and the education system; a universal approach to access; substantial public investment in services and infrastructure; a participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance; and appropriate training and working conditions for all staff.

*For a New Public Education System* was published in 2005 by the Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat, a respected Catalan organisation dedicated to the education and professional development of teachers. This declaration puts forward important principles and understandings about the purpose and practice of services, organised under ten headings, setting out to present “a new education utopia”. It also takes a broad perspective, not distinguishing between services for young children and schools for older children and young people. It provides, therefore, an important opportunity to reflect on the relationship between these sectors.

## Our image of the child

***Children in Europe’s*** proposed principles for a European approach to services for young children build on previous European work, as outlined above. But they also build on our answer to that most fundamental of questions: what is our image of the child? The question is fundamental because discussion of services for young children must start with young children. To ask the question is to recognise that there are many possible images or understandings of childhood. To answer is to make a political and ethical choice, a choice that is very significant for policy,

provision and practice and offers a statement of values as a point of reference for the principles that follow.

Our image of the child is what Loris Malaguzzi, a leading European figure in the field of services for young children, termed the 'rich' child: by which he meant not materially rich, but a child born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages; an active learner, seeking the meaning of the world from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values; a child that can live, learn, listen and communicate, but always in relation with others; the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity; an individual, whose individuality and autonomy depend on interdependence, and who needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support.

We believe the child has an important place both in the public domain of society and in the private domain of the family. The family is essential to the child's well-being and development, to the child feeling loved, valued and cared for, and to the child's construction of identity, culture and value. The family is a site of diversity, a diversity that must be respected as a fundamental element of European society. But like the child, the family does not exist in isolation, it is part of society and in relationship with that society. The family has an important role in upbringing, but that role is mediated by many wider forces: the support and respect it receives from society; the demands of the workplace and a more and more competitive capitalism; the influences of an increasingly powerful media and information technology; and much else besides. The family, in short, may provide a private domain for childhood, but it is embedded in the public domain; it is neither the first nor last educator, but an important part of a complex network of educative relationships within which the child is situated.

This child requires and deserves a service that is holistic in approach, which assumes the inseparability of care and education, reason and emotion, body and mind; which has the potential for an infinite range of possibilities - cultural, linguistic, social, aesthetic, ethical, political and economic; and which is a meeting place for children and adults in the physical but also the social, cultural and political sense of the word. This is a service envisaged as a public institution, a forum and a children's space, a site for encounter and relating, where children and adults meet and commit to something, where they can dialogue, listen and discuss in order to share meanings. It is a place of ethical and political praxis, a space for research and creativity, coexistence and pleasure, critical thought and emancipation. It is a place for the formation of individuality and autonomy, but also for strengthening interdependency and solidarity without which individuality and autonomy are not possible. This service is not a substitute for the family, but a complement and a support, offering children and parents additional opportunities. Last but not least, it is a right of all citizens, from birth.

This view of services for young children contests others that are gaining ground today in Europe: services as producers of narrowly defined commodities such as 'childcare' and 'education outcomes', competing for parent-customers in the marketplace; and services as places for governing children through applying technologies for the efficient production of predetermined outcomes.

## Proposal for a European approach to services for young children

Having set out this statement of values based on our image of the child, **Children in Europe** proposes ten principles as the basis for a European approach to services for young children. We offer these in a spirit of openness and with a desire for democratic dialogue: but with a clear aim of seeking common ground that can ensure all young children in Europe common rights with respect to services – an urgent task at a time when increasing numbers of children attend these services.

We also recognise that the services considered here are only part of a network of services and other policies that are needed to ensure a good childhood, to support parenthood and to reduce inequality, exclusion and injustice.

**These principles should be considered as goals to strive for. In many cases, they will need to be phased in rather than implemented immediately. The implementation period will be a subject of debate. *Children in Europe's* view is that they can and should be implemented by 2020, that is over a 12 year period.**

## Principles

### **1. Access: an entitlement for all children**

Access is a right of all children. All children should be entitled to a place in services for young children, irrespective of: any disability or other special needs they may have; where they live; family income or other circumstances, including whether or not their parents are employed. This entitlement for children is not an alternative to maternity or parental leave, which is already an entitlement for all European parents; both are needed and both are of value to children and parents.

### **2. Affordability: a free service**

As services for young children are an entitlement and a public responsibility, they should be provided free of charge. The principle of free access is already implemented in many member states in services for children from 3 to 6 years; it should be extended to services for children under 3 years. Funding for services should come from taxation. The review of evidence by OECD in *Starting Strong II* concludes that direct funding of services brings more benefits than indirect funding via subsidies to parents.

### **3. Pedagogical approach: holistic and multi-purpose**

Services should be understood as public institutions and sites for encounter and relationships between children and adults. They should adopt a holistic approach to children and multiple purposes, which recognise the multiplicity of possibilities that these services can offer as well as the diversity of children and families. They should provide safe and secure care ('childcare'); indeed, they should work with an ethic of care, which should be embodied in all their activities and relationships. But the provision of care should be placed in a wider context, as an integral and inseparable part of children's upbringing, a broad goal that recognises the importance of space and play in children's lives and which includes learning, social relationships, ethics, aesthetics, and emotional and physical well-being – 'education in its broadest sense'. Services should not only be open to new purposes and roles, but also to outcomes that are not anticipated in advance. Outcomes matter, but not only those that are predefined. The question to ask of any service is not 'has it achieved targets a, b and c?' – but 'what has it achieved?'

### **4. Participation: an essential value**

Services should embody participation as an essential value, as an expression of democracy and as a means to combat social exclusion. Participation requires pedagogical work that supports the development and upbringing of each child. Participation means the active inclusion of the entire community: all young children and adults, including parents, professionals of all kinds working in services, and other citizens. Participation enables all of these groups to contribute to the construction of a common project and to every aspect of the life of the service including helping in many ways and active involvement in management, decisions and evaluation.

## **5. Coherence: a framework to support a common approach**

All services should operate within a single and coherent policy framework that ensures a common approach and shared conditions across all services for young children in certain key areas where coherence is an essential value. These key areas, which constitute the framework, should include: access; affordability; pedagogical approach; a curricular framework; participation; evaluation; minimum environmental and staffing standards including the qualification and conditions of the workforce; and a supportive infrastructure. Constructing and applying this single and coherent policy framework across services for children from birth to compulsory school age will be easier when one department at all levels of government is responsible for all services.

## **6. Diversity and choice: conditions for democracy**

All services should recognise, respect and positively value diversity in its many dimensions and forms as a fundamental element and value of European culture. They should support diversity of language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability, and challenge stereotypes and discrimination. This should be expressed in their openness to all children and families, in their practice and in the composition of their workforce, which should reflect the diversity of the local community; this will include 40 percent male workers in the longer term and 20 percent by 2020. Services should be encouraged and supported to explore and experiment with diverse paradigms, theories and practices, to contest dominant discourses and to create new thinking and ways of working. Services, therefore, should be places where diversity is not just reproduced but is actively created, supporting the co-construction by all participants, children and adults, of new and different knowledges, values and identities.

Recognition, respect and valuing of diversity – of people, practices and perspectives – and of choice understood as participatory and inclusive collective decision-making (the *democratic exercise of choice*) are conditions for democracy in services for young children, another essential value that should underpin all aspects of these services.

Parents and children should have some choice about which services they can access. But this *individual exercise of choice* is only one meaning of choice and is one of many values. It should not be prioritised over other values.

## **7. Evaluation: participatory, democratic and transparent**

Evaluation should be an ongoing, participatory and democratic process. Evaluation should be open to all citizens, children and adults, providing the opportunity for everyone to discuss real, concrete things and to take responsibility for making judgements of value with fellow citizens - rather than hiding behind the assumed scientific objectivity offered by expert and managerial evaluations. This requires methods such as pedagogical documentation that make practice visible, transparent and subject to reflection, dialogue, interpretation and value judgements – and leave space open for finding unexpected outcomes.

## **8. Valuing the work: a 0-6 profession and parity with school teachers**

Our image of services for young children and the principles outlined above require a professional worker who is qualified to work in a pedagogical way with children from birth to 6 years, and to work not only with children, but also with their families and the wider community. This is complex, demanding and important work. The professional may take a variety of different forms; she or he, for example, may be a pedagogue, a teacher, an atelierista, a pedagoga; in some countries, there will be a separate and quite distinct 0-6 profession, while in other countries work with young children will be an area of specialisation within a broader profession. But whatever the form, all professionals need certain common competences: to think critically, to make contextualised judgements, to work with both individuals and groups, to border cross, and to listen, communicate and work democratically. All professional workers, too, need to be equal with teachers in the compulsory school

system, with respect to the level of initial qualification and continuing professional development (continuous education), pay and other employment conditions. Not all those who work in services for young children need be qualified at this level: but most, both female and male workers, should be.

### **9. Services for young children and compulsory school: a strong and equal partnership**

Services for young children and compulsory schools should work towards what OECD terms a "strong and equal partnership", being treated as equal parts of the education system. This partnership should be based on a shared understanding of the image of the child, of services for children and of education. Education, in this shared understanding, is a process of constructing knowledge, values and identity, concerned primarily with emancipation and the growth of healthy, competent and moral people. It should be organised not around academic subjects, but around areas that are important for individual flourishing, a democratic society and a sustainable environment: communication; culture; science and technology; health, the environment and sustainable development; democracy and citizenship; creativity and curiosity; and care.

Compulsory schooling has much to learn from services for young children, especially as envisioned here. Pedagogical 'meeting places' are needed where both services can dialogue and co-construct new values and practices that enable both to provide education in its broadest sense, recognizing that narrowly stated academic achievement is not the only or necessarily the main goal of education.

There are a number of conditions that will promote a 'strong and equal partnership', including a strong and self-confident early childhood sector. This is more likely to be achieved where children do not enter primary school until at least 6 years of age.

### **10. Cross-national partnership: learning with other countries**

Europe has a rich heritage of innovative and democratic theory and practice in services for young children, continued today in local (and a few national) experiences, some of which are living examples of the principles we have set out here. At the same time, Europe is facing strong forces that put at risk all that is best in our heritage and current experience, replacing them with an impoverished and standardised alternative, an approach that is narrow and atomising, calculating and contractual, instrumental and technical. To contest this approach to services, and to confront it with an alternative European approach, it is important to expand and deepen partnerships across Europe, involving many participants and all levels.

We are not starting from nothing: **Children in Europe** is one of a number of partnerships and networks that already exist. We need to create more cross-national spaces, European places of encounter, where there can be dialogue and reflection and opportunities for border crossing to explore new perspectives, where practice (at all levels, including policy) can be made visible and discussed critically, and where we can learn with each other, co-constructing new knowledge. As part of this process, exchanges of workers between countries should also be further facilitated, both short-term and longer-term.

This Policy paper is intended to stimulate a democratic dialogue to support the creation of a European politics of childhood and services for young children.

**Children in Europe** would like to hear the views of individuals and organisations.