

COFACE THEMATIC NOTE

HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE:

LOW CHILDREN-TO-STAFF RATIO AS
A PRIMARY DRIVER FOR CHILDREN'S
WELL-BEING AND FAMILIES'
ENGAGEMENT

MAY 2023



**HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE:
LOW CHILDREN-TO-STAFF RATIO AS A PRIMARY DRIVER FOR CHILDREN'S
WELL-BEING AND FAMILIES' ENGAGEMENT**

BACKGROUND TO THE NOTE: THE EU POLICY CONTEXT AT A GLANCE

Principle 11 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**¹ states that *children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) of good quality*. Since its adoption in 2017, the European Commission has been actively engaged in developing policy proposals and indicators to improve the **availability and quality of ECEC in the European Union**.

The most recent framework is the European Care Strategy, including the **Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030**.² It came to reinforce other actions such as the **EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child**³ and the **European Child Guarantee**⁴ that also calls for free access to quality accessible ECEC services for children in vulnerable situations. Both frameworks are part of Council Recommendations, following the steps of the 2019 **Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems**.⁵ Other policies such as the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030**⁶ also put forward actions to make ECEC more accessible to children with disabilities.

At this crucial time, as governments across the EU are called to increase the overall uptake of ECEC, the ambition of COFACE Families Europe is to support all children's right to education and the reconciliation of work and family life for parents and carers by developing policies and workplace measures around three pillars: access to Resources, Services and Time. ECEC is an essential part of the Services pillar. COFACE Families Europe has been advocating for high-quality ECEC settings that are accessible, inclusive, and function as a two- and multi-generational tool benefiting children and adults.⁷

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14785-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>

⁵ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2019.189.01.0004.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2019%3A189%3AFULL

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1484&langId=en#:~:text=In%20March%202021%2C%20the%20European,Europe%20and%20around%20the%20world>

⁷ See COFACE two positions: *Families on the Edge: Building a comprehensive European work-life balance reality* (2017) <https://coface-eu.org/families-on-the-edge-the-eu-urgently-needs-to-address-the-work-life-balance-needs-of-women-and-men/> *An EU Deal for Childcare* (2018), <https://coface-eu.org/work-life-balance-part-2-an-ambitious-new-eu-deal-for-childcare/>

SETTING THE SCENE: CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY ECEC

High-quality ECEC systems ensure that every child has regular access to a variety of responsive, sensitive interactions with adults, peers, and materials in playgroups and early education classrooms.⁸⁹ COFACE highlights the multiple socio-economic benefits of children's regular participation in this type of nurturing and engaging environment. For day-care and preschool centres to offer a high-quality service to all children, however, a number of enabling elements must be in place.¹⁰ At this juncture, when public authorities across the EU are pressed to expand ECEC participation, it is essential to keep the central elements of quality provision from being sacrificed in the effort to achieve universal access. To avoid this trade-off, EU governments must make a strong commitment to developing high-quality ECEC systems.

Special attention must be paid to several aspects, including but not restricted to: employing qualified personnel and offering them satisfactory pay, good working conditions, regular in-service training, and career development opportunities; making sure that the ratio of babies and toddlers in playgroups relative to qualified practitioners is appropriate in every day-care and preschool centre, and includes a group size threshold; creating strong educational partnerships between parents/guardians and ECEC practitioners (including both care providers and management) that focus on the best interests of the child and acknowledge the expertise that parents have regarding their own children, regardless of their family background creating a continuum of care; ensuring that educational guidelines are in place, emphasising targeted pedagogical approaches based on observation and responsiveness to children's specific needs, as well as the importance to reflect and promote diversity, creating equitable opportunities for all.

THE RATIO OF CHILDREN TO STAFF AS A CRUCIAL DRIVER OF HIGH-QUALITY ECEC, IMPACTING ON ALL CORE ASPECTS OF PRACTICE AND DELIVERY

In this thematic note, COFACE examines a crucial precondition for high-quality ECEC provision: **the ratio of children to staff in daycare settings (child-staff ratio)**. Low child-staff ratios can yield multiple benefits for the children and all the other actors involved. These include the ability for staff to create conditions for meaningful interactions with toddlers and infants, offering opportunities for stronger partnerships between parents and ECEC staff, and providing the necessary conditions for responsive, targeted approaches to the specific needs of children with disabilities.

The child-to-staff ratio¹¹ maintained in playgroups within early childhood centers is an essential feature of provision that is directly associated with perceived quality changes in infants' and toddlers' daily experiences across ECEC centers¹². As a quality measure, the child-staff ratio places the focus on both the level to which nurseries and day care centers are resourced, and how these resources translate into meaningful contacts and interactions between infants and practitioners.

⁸ Dalli, C. and White, E. (2017). Policy and Pedagogy for birth-to-three-year-olds. In: White, E. and Dalli, C. (eds.) *Under-three Year Olds in Policy and Practice*, Springer, Singapore.

⁹ Cadima, J. et al. (2020). *Literature review on early childhood education and care for children under the age of 3*. OECD Education Working Paper No. 243. OECD. Paris

¹⁰ See in particular the 2014 publication of a Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission), which included ten statements on high-quality ECEC provision based on five dimensions (access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding) provided a basis for the 2019 Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems and the quality sections of the 2022 Council Recommendation on the Barcelona targets for 2030.

¹¹ The ratio is normally calculated as the full-time equivalent (FTE) number of children enrolled in an ECEC setting per FTE staff.

¹² Vandenbroeck, M., Lenaerts, K. and Beblavy, M. (2018). *Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them*. EENEE Analytical Report No. 32. European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE). Publications Office of the European Union. Luxembourg

Better child-to-staff ratios - i.e., fewer infants per skilled practitioner - are associated with key indicators of quality of care, such as increases in meaningful one-to-one interactions in playgroups, more time available for care routines, and frequency of parent-educator contacts. The benefits to improve these standards are long term and well-documented, ranging from improved children's well-being and engagement levels to early socio-emotional development.¹³

The impact of favorable child-staff ratios is greater for infants and toddlers than for children over three years. However, considerable evidence suggests that lower ratios favour better care provision and higher quality interactions between adults and children across the entire ECEC cycle. Estimates of ideal child-staff ratios register some variation, with most recommendations setting the optimum ratio in playgroups of under-two-year-old infants between 3:1 and 4:1, increasing to 5:1 for two- to three-year-old children and 10:1 for children between three to five years old.¹⁴

Furthermore, the child-to-educator ratio has a direct impact on the quality of educational interactions, significantly conditioning the type of pedagogical approach chosen by educators and teachers - particularly in activities with children older than 3 years. If the ratio exceeds a certain threshold, more relational, play-based activities - not to mention outdoor education – are seen to become more complex to organize, and thus tend to be replaced by a more "prescriptive" curriculum.¹⁵

Whereas low child-staff ratios are a pivotal feature at the center of any well-functioning ECEC system, it is important to remember that for these structural standards to give rise to effective system quality, other procedural aspects remain crucial. Among these, a key role is played by collaborative practices in the workplace, including mentoring and coaching of young practitioners and shared learning. With the same child-staff teacher ratio, day-care centers where more practitioners are present at the same time provide a better working environment for educators, in that it would allow members of staff to support one another and discuss activities.¹⁶

Correct calculation of the ratio

Children-to-staff ratios are a key determinant of children's meaningful experiences in day-care and preschool settings. However, their calculation is not always straightforward. First, calculation of the ratio should be based exclusively on the number of qualified education specialists and not include volunteers and trainees.

It is also important to differentiate between, on the one hand, **'regular' activities performed by qualified practitioners within the playgroup/classroom context**, including daily educational and caring practices but also informal information exchange routines with parents during dropoff and pickup moments; on the other, time devoted by staff towards a set of fundamental and yet non-educational activities, including formal family counselling sessions, management and communication functions, maintenance, and cleaning.

A five-to-one ratio based on playgroup activities where 10 children are actively supported by 2 qualified practitioners, has clearly a different meaning than in a classroom with the same number of children where however only one practitioner is concerned with educational interaction while the other performs cooking or cleaning functions.

¹³ Cadima, J. et al. (2020). *ibid.*

¹⁴ Dalli, C. et al. (2011). Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: What should it look like? A literature review. *Report to the Ministry of Education*. Ministry of Education: New Zealand.

¹⁵ Bennett, J., & Tayler, C. (2006). *Starting strong II. Early childhood education and care*. OECD Publishing.

¹⁶ Arbeitsgemeinschaft der deutschen Familienorganisationen - AGF (2016). Areas of action for high-quality education, care and nurturing in day care centers. Position Paper. April 2016. https://www.ag-familie.de/media/docs16/AGF_Position_Child_Care_Quality_EN_2016.; Goelman, H. et al. (2006). Towards a predictive model of quality in Canadian childcare centers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 21, no. 3: 280-295.

When setting minimum staffing standards for day-care and preschool facilities, it is important to consider the varying needs of the children. As these facilities typically reflect the diversity of society, they require different levels of support and guidance. Children from families in vulnerable situations who are socially and economically excluded for instance, children with disabilities are examples of individuals who may require special responses and resources.

The adequacy of child-to-staff ratios is always relative to the context. Recourse to staff with additional qualifications may occasionally be made necessary by the composition of classrooms or playgroups. Special education practitioners should however not be included in the calculation of general child-to-staff ratio unless the activities they perform are directly aimed at the entire class.

The same holds true for ECEC directors and practitioners involved in management, communication, or parental counselling functions. Managers should consider these additional tasks when calculating the child-staff ratio and allot appropriate time quotas for releasing practitioners from their educational duties. This way, the time off given to staff can be accurately accounted for.

Finally, when determining appropriate children-to-staff ratios, it is essential to ensure that these are maintained throughout the entire day and even in the event of holidays or unexpected interruptions such as illnesses.

BETTER CHILD-STAFF RATIOS PROVIDE THE PRE-CONDITIONS FOR QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES BY TODDLERS AND INFANTS IN DAY CARE CENTERS

Lower child-to-staff ratios improve caring and educational interactions between infants and caregivers, favoring the development of relationships that are sensitive and responsive. Skilled caregivers with fewer children are better equipped to engage infants and toddlers consistently with sensitive, responsive, and scaffolding interactions, while encouraging them to learn and explore.¹⁷

Child-adult interactions bring greatest benefits when they can evolve over long stretches of time and gradually grow complex. In this regard, child-staff ratios are known to impact on the quality of staff working conditions, which is in turn linked to stable relationships between children and practitioners. Whereas evidence for a direct association between working conditions and child development is not yet strong, workplace characteristics are known to affect staff turnover rates. ECEC settings with fewer infants per practitioner make for better working environments - which have a strong impact on staff satisfaction and stability in care.¹⁸

Better child-staff ratios further provide the preconditions for integrated *educare approaches*¹⁹, whereby the dimensions of education and care are considered as inseparable, and routine caregiving situations - such as meals, bathing, or dressing the baby - are understood as special opportunities for listening and understanding the child in meaningful one-to-one interactions. Today time limitations represent the main

¹⁷ Dalli et al. (2011). *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Peeters, J., Cameron, C., Lazzari, A., Peleman, B., Budginaite, I., Hauari, H. and Siarova, H. (2015). *Working conditions, training of early childhood care workers and quality of services: A systematic review*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

¹⁹ The notion of 'educare' yields a holistic understanding of education and care as two deeply intertwined, inseparable dimensions of the educational practice. In pedagogical debates, 'educare' is often used as a shorthand for approaches advocating the child's right to a global development, and thus to a balanced approach by ECEC practitioners to all his or her physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional needs. When applied to the organization of ECEC, the concept of 'educare' is sometimes employed to mark a shift away from traditional siloed perspectives, towards an increase in inter-sectorial coordination and integration between day care nursery and preschool services.

barrier to staff acknowledgment of the value of care moments and of the added emotional investments by practitioners to listen and understand children.²⁰

Moreover, higher child-to-educator ratios can constitute a barrier to appropriate developmental early childhood pedagogies, built on genuine dedication by the practitioner to listening and understanding the interests and developmental characteristics of the individual child – whatever they may be. A “manageable” child-staff ratio facilitates the adoption of pedagogical approaches that are more centered on children’s personal experiences, building on the child’s right to participate as an ‘expert’ in his or her own life, and acknowledging the value of each individual child’s experiences’.²¹

To the contrary, if the structural preconditions for ‘*educare*’ are absent it is difficult for ECEC staff to practice inter-relational, play-based approaches. Preschool settings where practitioners work alone with entire class groups are thus more likely to adopt prescriptive curricula – reliant on more standardized, “junior school like” educational models. This is clearly extremely relevant for children in disadvantage situations who, for various reasons, are more likely to benefit from targeted attention and custom learning agendas closer to their needs.

BETTER CHILD-STAFF RATIOS OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRONGER PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND ECEC STAFF

Greater adult-child ratios in day care centers allow caregivers more time for discussing and planning children's activities but also, crucially, to communicate and develop relationships with parents and guardians. Further highlighting the importance of receptive behavior and affectionate practices, it has been noted that confident, open relationships between educators and children are strongly dependent on the quality of the relationship educators develop with their parents.

Better child-to-staff ratios may lead to a set-up that allows ECEC staff to engage parents in targeted, one-to-one guidance, mentoring, comforting, and emotional support. Open communication and frequency of educator-parent contact are key drivers of successful partnerships between ECEC centers and families, which in turn result in greater continuity of childrearing practices and higher levels of parents' perceived support.

Information exchange between practitioners and parents/guardians during daily drop-off and pick-up is an essential component of day-care and preschool routines. In this regard, an adequate child-to-staff ratio allows staff more leeway in terms of devoting time to engaging and communicating with families. At the same time, having more practitioners in each playgroup or class during the day enables them to make more detailed assessments of each child, leading to more timely and thoughtful reports to parents.

Establishing a connection with families in precarious situations requires special attention

Whereas partnerships between families and day-care staff is a key lever for promoting and strengthening coherence and continuity of childrearing practices, there is an inherent risk that these relationships become instrumentalized as a tool for imposing external expectations on families in vulnerable situations such as migrant and low-income families - often identified as missing the 'skills to participate as expected in their

²⁰ Cadima, J. et al. (2020). *ibid*.

²¹ Moss, P. (2020). The structure/culture divide in early childhood services - and how we might bridge it. In: Eydal, G. B. and Rostgaard, T. (eds.) *Handbook of Family Policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing. United Kingdom.

child's education'.²² Single-parent families and parents of children with disabilities are also sometimes stigmatized as unable to comply with mainstream conceptions of their role.

Facing an increasingly diverse spectrum of families, special emphasis should be paid by ECEC professionals to build meaningful relationships with all parents, rather than to impose upon them expectations embedded in prevailing cultural notions of value and knowledge, prejudice, and preconception. Training of ECEC practitioners on inclusion and cultural, gender bias, inclusive communication can therefore benefit the staff/parents' relations and consequently benefit the children themselves.

Forms of parental involvement that are not anchored in preconceived understandings of educational attainment, but rather in a family's right to information and to have their voice heard, require that ECEC systems deploy adequate structural resources. Much like in the case of child-centered pedagogies, understaffing represents a severe impediment in the development of family/center partnerships that value diversity and promote the family perspective as an integral part of ECEC provision.²³

BETTER CHILD-STAFF RATIOS CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR MEANINGFUL, RESPONSIVE APPROACHES TO THE SPECIFIC DEMANDS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Children with disabilities have the right to participate in quality education in inclusive and accessible settings on an equal basis with others. Appropriate child-staff ratios that allow infants and toddlers to develop warm relationships and spend quality one-to-one time with caregivers are of greatest benefits for children with disabilities and their families. Planning meaningful experiences for children with disabilities requires adaptability and contextualized decision-making, combined with an understanding of early development, inclusive education methods, and practices of habilitation and rehabilitation. Educators are required to dynamically adjust their practices according not only to the time and context of learning, but also to the accommodation of needs of all children in the classroom, supported by funding arrangements which support such practices.

ECEC settings that provide caregivers the time and flexibility to plan meaningful experiences based on observations of children's specific needs tend to work better for children with disabilities who are most in need of interactions that are sensitive and responsive to non-verbal cues. Finding the balance between interpreting children's needs and planning new experiences is a complex and dynamic process. For this, the relation with families and carers is essential as the continuum of care between various professionals and families is essential to children with disabilities. Maintaining child-staff ratios that are adequate to the operational requirements of caregivers is a necessary feature of any quality ECEC system, in line with the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

²² Lehrer, J., Van Laere, K., Hadley, F., and E. Rouse (2023). Why we need to move beyond instrumentalization when discussing families and early childhood education and care. In: Lehrer et al. (eds.) Relationships with Families in Early Childhood Education and Care. Routledge. London].

²³ Lehrer, J. et al. (2023). Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS

Raising the quality of ECEC comes with a financial cost. At the same time, maintaining existing levels of quality while increasing participation also requires additional resources. The Council Recommendation on the Barcelona targets for 2030 calls for a minimum of 45% of children below the age of three to participate in ECEC²⁴. COFACE recognizes that national and local authorities may be enticed to relax quality standards, such as the maximum number of children to staff, to increase the number of places available in formal ECEC settings and meet their new expansionist targets. But those targets cannot be played against each other.

1. To avoid compromising quality while expanding access, it is essential that national and regional legislation should include binding ECEC quality guidelines and minimum standards for provision. Moreover, the necessary resources should be provided to ensure that these standards are maintained and even improved. COFACE therefore urges legislators to make an unwavering commitment to provide the resources needed to reach these goals.

2. COFACE recommends that when discussing 'adequate' child-staff ratios, the specificity of each child and family's experience should be considered. Improving ratios can help ensure meaningful relationships between children and adults, as well as making ECEC services more accessible to parents with disabilities and children with disabilities. Considering individual needs from a whole-family perspective, appropriate ratios can also facilitate parents' ability to balance work, family, and personal life.

3. ECEC settings are highly complex and involve many professional roles. It is essential to understand the differences between them concerning their tasks. When discussing the ideal child-staff ratio, the complexity of the various roles present in the service must be considered. To ensure quality, COFACE suggests that ECEC guidelines should clearly specify that the ratio refers only to qualified staff actively engaged in pedagogical and care activities, and does not include those involved in managerial, auxiliary, counselling and mentoring functions, or merely present in the premises.

COFACE acknowledges that there is a widespread shortage of professionals in the care sector across the EU. This is true for ECEC as it is in all caring sectors. Despite this, COFACE continues to advocate for the high-quality day-care and preschool centres committed to providing the best possible support to each and every child. To do this, we must make the care sector more attractive to work in. Which includes providing fair compensation. We must also invest in quality university education for professionals and offer them opportunities for career growth within the sector. Additionally, we must give ECEC practitioners the necessary support to be able to focus on children without facing negative working conditions.

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²⁴ Specific targets apply to Member States that have yet to reach the 2002 goals.

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Co-funded by
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Co-funded by the EaSI strand of the ESF+ programme. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.