

1

Early Childhood Education and Care



Participation in education by three- and four-year-olds tends now to be high, though coverage is a third or less of the age group in several OECD countries. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been a growing priority in OECD countries, and the subject of past and ongoing OECD analysis. A major OECD review was published in 2006 – Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care – which has been followed up through an ongoing international network. There are wide differences between systems, including between those which have a strong “preparation for school” approach and those implementing a broader social pedagogy, between those with mainly public provision and those relying strongly on private household resources, as well as in the relative emphasis on education and childcare. ECEC can bring a wide range of benefits for children, parents and society at large, but the magnitude of benefits is conditional on quality. Therefore the OECD in 2012 released Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care, which serves as a reference guide and aims to encourage quality in ECEC. Additionally, the 2012 edition of Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators includes a new indicator on the state of early childhood education, providing a rich comparative insight into early childhood education systems around the world.



INTRODUCTION

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

A major OECD review in the field of early childhood – *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, published in 2006 – was a follow-up to an earlier international review published in 2001. Its policy orientations are broadly focused on overcoming the under-developed status of the sector that remains typical of many countries. In recognition that early interventions are conditional on their quality, the OECD published the third in the *Starting Strong* series in 2012 – *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* – which defines “quality” and serves as a reference guide for those involved in shaping early childhood education and care. The Starting Strong Network has continued to help countries to develop effective and efficient approaches, and good practice in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). It does so through its clearing house of new policy research, data and methodology development, workshops, and by fostering contacts among professionals worldwide.

The 2012 edition of *Education at a Glance* includes a new indicator on the state of early childhood education, and as such provides a rich comparative insight into the early childhood education systems around the world. Future policy work will continue to investigate how policies can promote and enhance quality, and how they can effectively be put in place. It will focus on monitoring the quality in ECEC and the development of internationally comparable indicators.

KEY FINDINGS

In the majority of countries – but not all – education now begins for most well before the age of 5: Already over three-quarters of 4-year-olds (79%) are enrolled in early childhood education programmes across OECD countries, and this rises to 83% in the OECD countries that are part of the European Union. Enrolment rates for early childhood education at this age vary from over 95% in Belgium, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain and the United Kingdom, at one end of the spectrum, to less than 60% in Australia, Canada, Finland, Greece, Poland, Switzerland and Turkey. The highest enrolments of 3-year-olds in early childhood education are found in Belgium, France, Iceland, Italy, Norway and Spain with rates of more than 90%.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C2*

Demand for early childhood provision for those aged under 3 years far outstrips supply in many countries: Though in some OECD countries the majority of the children under 3 years are in early childhood education and care, in most the supply of these services falls well short



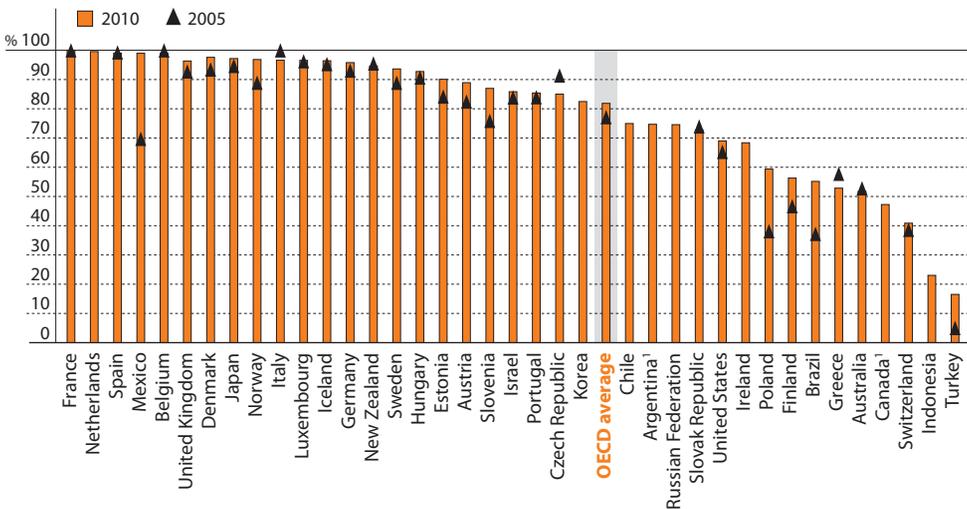
of meeting demands. The highest enrolments of 3-year-olds in early childhood programmes are found in Belgium (99%), France (100%), Iceland (95%), Italy (93%), Norway (95%) and Spain (99%). On the other side of the spectrum are Australia, Canada, and Switzerland both with 10% or less of 3-year-olds in early childhood programmes. OECD research has found that the demand for services for these young children is significantly higher than the places available in many countries, even in those with provisions for long parental leave. In countries where public funding for parental leave is limited, many working parents must either seek solutions in the private market, where ability to pay significantly influences accessibility to quality services, or else rely on informal arrangements with family, friends and neighbours.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C2; Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2012*

Figure 1.1.

Enrolment rates at age four in early childhood and primary education (2005 and 2010)

Full-time and part-time pupils in public and private institutions



1. Year of reference 2009.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the enrolment rates of 4-year-olds in 2010.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Argentina and Indonesia: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (World Education Indicators programme). Table C2.1. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932663055>

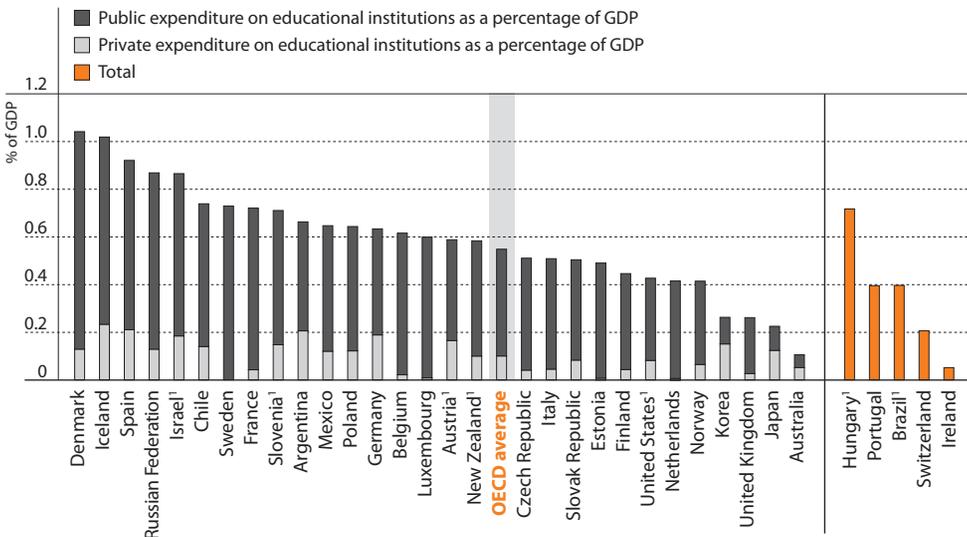
Publicly-funded pre-primary provision tends to be more strongly developed in the European than in the non-European countries of the OECD: In Europe, the concept of universal access of 3-6 year-olds is generally accepted. Most countries in this region provide all children with at least two years of free, public-funded provision before they begin primary provision. With the exception of Ireland and the Netherlands, such access is a statutory



right from the age of 3 years and in some even before. Early education programmes in Europe tend to be free and often located in schools. In OECD countries outside Europe, free early education tends to be only available from age 5, though many children are enrolled from age 4 in Australia, Korea and some US states. On average in OECD countries 18% of expenditure of pre-primary institutions comes from private sources. However, this proportion varies widely: ranging from 5% or less in Belgium, Estonia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden, at one end of the spectrum, to over 48% in Australia, Japan and Korea, at the other.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006, Chapter 4; Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C2*

Figure 1.2.
Expenditure on early childhood education institutions as a percentage of GDP (2009)
By funding source



1. Includes some expenditure on childcare.

Countries are ranked in descending order of public and private expenditure on educational institutions.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. Argentina: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (World Education Indicators programme). Table C2.2. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932663074>

Participation in pre-primary programmes tends to lead to better later outcomes: PISA results (2009) show that in all OECD countries 15-year-old students who attended pre-primary education for more than one year on average outperformed students who did not. This finding stands, even after socio-economic background is accounted for. The difference between students who have attended pre-primary for more than one year and those who have



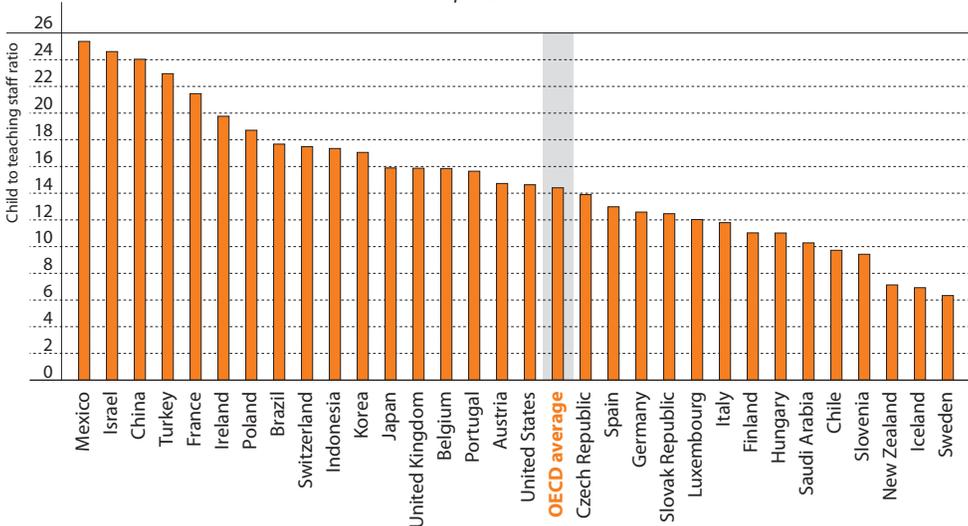
not attended pre-primary at all averaged 54 score points in the PISA reading assessment – or more than one year of formal schooling. PISA research also shows that students perform better when they have been enrolled in pre-primary programmes of longer duration, with lower child-to-teacher ratios and higher expenditures per child.

 *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C2; PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes, 2010, Chapter 5*

There are 14 children for each staff member at the pre-primary level in OECD countries, with wide variations: Child-to-staff ratios play a key role in ensuring quality for better child development. The ratio of children to teaching staff is also an important indicator of the resources devoted to education. On average in OECD countries, there are 14 children for every teacher. The child-to-teacher ratio ranges from more than 20 in France, Israel, Mexico, Turkey and the partner country China, to fewer than 10 in Chile, Estonia, Iceland, New Zealand, Slovenia and Sweden. Some countries, e.g. Ireland and Israel, make extensive use of teachers' aides at the pre-primary level.

 *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, 2006; Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators, 2012, Indicator C2*

Figure 1.3.
Ratio of children to teaching staff in early childhood education (2010)
Public and private institutions



Countries are ranked in descending order of children to teaching staff ratios in early childhood education.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. China and Indonesia: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (World Education Indicators programme). Saudi Arabia: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Table C2.2. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).

StatLink  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932663093>



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

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

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

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

POLICY DIRECTIONS

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

- **Place well-being, early development and learning at the core of early childhood approaches:** Rather than being an adjunct to labour market policies with weak development agendas or an underresourced “Cinderella” education service, early childhood education and care needs to have the child and her/his well-being and learning at the core.
- **Aspire towards early childhood education and care systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy:** The touchstones of a democratic approach are to extend the agency of the child and right of parents to be involved in the education of their children. Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn, and learning to live together are the critical elements to be promoted in each child.



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

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



Research emphasises that realising the benefits depends on the quality of the early interventions. The OECD “toolbox” on the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) presents five “policy levers” for action:

- **Setting out quality goals and regulations:** Setting out explicit quality goals and regulations can help align resources with prioritised areas, promote more co-ordinated child-centred services, level the playing field for providers, and help parents make informed choices.
- **Designing and implementing curriculum standards:** Curriculum or learning standards can promote more even quality for ECEC provision across different settings, help staff to enhance pedagogical strategies, and help parents to better understand child development.
- **Improving qualifications, training and working conditions:** ECEC staff play the key role in ensuring healthy child development and learning; areas for reform include qualifications, initial education, professional development and working conditions.
- **Engaging families and communities:** Parents and communities should be regarded as partners working towards the same goal. Home learning environments and neighbourhood matter for healthy child development and learning.
- **Advancing data collection, research and monitoring:** Data, research and monitoring are powerful tools for improving children’s outcomes and driving continuous improvement in service delivery.

 [Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2012, Executive Summary](#)



References and Further Reading

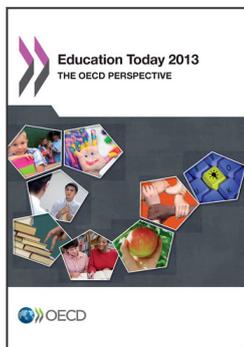
OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing.

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

OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes (Volume II)*, PISA, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2012), *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing.

OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing.



From:
Education Today 2013
The OECD Perspective

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/edu_today-2013-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2012), "Early Childhood Education and Care", in *Education Today 2013: The OECD Perspective*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/edu_today-2013-5-en

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.