



# Early childhood education and care and the Covid-19 pandemic

*Understanding and managing the impact of  
the crisis on the sector*

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## Foreword



### **Mariya Gabriel**

Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth

Early childhood education and care is the essential first step of the lifelong learning ladder for all children. The EU and governments of all EU countries are committed to ensuring easier access to early childhood education and care services and to improving their quality.

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared there was a COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, most European countries closed their schools. In many cases, they also closed early childhood education and care services, although some of them remained open to provide childcare for 'essential' workers. This highlighted the crucial importance of these services to families and society at large.

For the past 18 months, children, families, early childhood education and care professionals and services as well as decision-makers have faced many challenges and questions. What would be the impact of the lockdowns and the pandemic restrictions on young children? Would there be any learning loss? Should early childhood education and care staff be prioritised for testing and vaccination? How would the sector cope financially with the loss of earnings and increased expenses? And dozens more questions....

Experts and professionals around the world, including in Europe, have been raising awareness of the need to better integrate the early childhood education and care sector into all local, national and European management and recovery decisions during and after the pandemic.

If we agree that high-quality education and care are essential for young children, we need to make it as much a priority as compulsory education. As a first step, I hope this report helps to understand how the early childhood education and care sector was managed during the pandemic, highlight weaknesses and opportunities, and describe the impact this period has had on children, families and early childhood education and care professionals and services.

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## Executive summary

Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)<sup>1</sup> is essential for the personal development, social integration, successful lifelong learning and later employability of all children. This is why it is so important to improve the quality and effectiveness of ECEC systems across Europe. In March 2020, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic, most EU countries decided to go into lockdown or impose restrictions on ECEC services. Since summer 2020, opening and working conditions have varied greatly depending on countries and the health situation. This report describes how the pandemic was handled in the ECEC sector across Europe. It goes on to look at the impact of the crisis and the measures adopted on ECEC services and staff, as well as families and children. It has been drafted on the basis of information gathered from ministries in charge of ECEC, experts, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the media, etc.

Stakeholders and observers broadly share the view that in many countries, the ECEC sector has been insufficiently supported and included in COVID-19 policy responses and measures, especially compared to other education sectors. It also appears that during lockdowns/emergencies, ECEC was most of the time only considered a childcare facility that needed to remain available for parents in 'essential' professions to be able to work. The pandemic has highlighted ECEC's essential role in supporting families and society at large. And yet, the sector's role in learning and inclusion and children's right to education has barely been mentioned.

When the pandemic started, ECEC settings were faced with many questions on how to handle the new situation: how to keep providing high-quality education and care, how to liaise with families, how to protect the most vulnerable children, what health and safety regulations had to be respected and how to do that, how to manage staff, how to ensure the financial security of the sector and its staff, etc. The report provides information on the guidance and support provided to ECEC services and staff and to families. It reflects the great diversity of ECEC governance systems in most European countries, with many levels of decision-making and financing, especially in split-system countries, where more than one ministry supervises the sector<sup>2</sup>. In the context of the pandemic, this has sometimes created difficulties.

Before the pandemic, the **need to invest in ECEC** was largely agreed on. ECEC services and observers have expressed concern about the financial impact the pandemic may have on current and future public investments in the sector. In response to the pandemic, many countries did provide financial support for ECEC services, to cover extra expenses or loss of income and maintain ECEC services. National, regional and local government responses have been wide-ranging, reflecting the heterogeneity and complexity of ECEC governance across Europe.

Observers and stakeholders also report criticisms of the guidance given to **ECEC services**, e.g. that it may have focused only on hygiene and safety, that it was not precise enough, that it was unrealistic or not feasible, that it did not cover all ECEC settings (only those for younger or older children, only some cities, etc.). This has created a lot of uncertainty and stress amongst owners/leaders and ECEC staff, highlighting the need for coherent and efficient governance of ECEC provision.

In a number of countries, ECEC settings have also had difficulties with the presence/recruitment/retention of ECEC staff during the pandemic, creating short- or long-term

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<sup>1</sup> ECEC refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the EU.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of split and integrated systems, see [Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition | Eurydice \(europa.eu\)](#).

staffing problems, exacerbating recurrent staff shortages. As a result, ECEC settings may have had to close temporarily, be unable to follow national regulations (e.g. about working with smaller groups of children) or had to employ insufficiently qualified staff, to the detriment of the quality of provision.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated stress or problems for **ECEC staff**, leading to renewed demands for recognition and better working conditions from ECEC professionals. Such problems relate to the health and safety of staff, employment, financial issues and possible job losses, as well as general working conditions and professional development. ECEC professionals have reported that their workload and stress levels have increased since the beginning of the pandemic, due to a lack of staff, fears for their own health, a (felt) lack of support from ECEC leaders, employers or decision-makers, and a lack of guidance on how to handle the situation. A number of ECEC staff have also expressed their disappointment over the lack of recognition for the work they do.

It is widely recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded disadvantages and poverty. Difficulties **families** with young children have experienced during the pandemic include the struggle to reconcile their professional and private lives while working from home, income reduction or job loss, and lack of family support to help with childcare. These difficulties may have affected parent-child relationships as well as children's own well-being, development and learning. For this reason, many national and local governments adopted measures to support families, mainly through financial aid and/or special leaves.

While the **educational value of ECEC** has now been clearly established by research, most surveys and research related to young children during the pandemic focus on the impact of lockdown on their health, well-being and general situation – rather than their cognitive and educational development.

Kindergarten settings have had great difficulties ensuring learning continuity for children during lockdowns, for a number of reasons, such as insufficient guidance and/or support from top-level authorities, dependence on parents' availability, motivation and skills, and the challenge of using new technologies efficiently with young children. In many countries, it was the kindergarten teachers themselves who had to find solutions, but the lack/insufficiency of a national strategy or guidance meant that many children were left out because of their age (too young – the educational aspect of ECEC for children under three was hardly ever considered) or because of their families' socio-economic circumstances (e.g. lack of digital equipment).

Since summer 2020, most settings have remained open to support parents' employment and children's education, care and well-being. However, conditions have been (very) different from what they were in normal times and there are currently very few responses to questions about providing nurturing education and care for children during a pandemic. Further research is therefore needed into, for example, the impact on skills development, language development, emotional well-being, equal access to ECEC, strategies to provide efficient learning during a pandemic, the measures needed to best support ECEC institutions and staff, etc.

The EU Quality Framework for ECEC establishes **monitoring and evaluation** as one of the main ways of ensuring quality. However, data on and research into ECEC during a pandemic was scarce, preventing close monitoring and an evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on ECEC institutions and staff, as well as on children and families. It was particularly noted that most of the focus was on other levels of education such as primary, secondary and higher education.

While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normal education and care and gave rise to many challenges, it also ushered in **positive new experiences and changes that should remain a part of post-pandemic**. These changes include smaller groups of children, deeper relationships with parents, better hygiene routines, and the promotion of outdoor



learning. The pandemic has also been an opportunity to promote the acquisition or development of digital skills among ECEC staff. It has also led to an improvement in communication skills and new ways of working in teams.

**For dealing with this pandemic and any potential future crisis, experts and stakeholders made recommendations in position papers and during numerous online events. These recommendations are summarised below.**

#### **Governance and funding of ECEC**

- The educational role of ECEC needs to be better acknowledged and supported by society and decision-makers, beyond just the crucial role of childcare that was evident during lockdowns.
- Public investment in the sector must be increased, or at least maintained at pre-pandemic levels.
- Investment should be made in improving infrastructures (additional spaces, outdoor spaces, adequate hygiene facilities, monitoring of air quality).
- Responsibilities should be clarified and cooperation between decision-makers improved, to serve all families and children equally; simplification of governance would also help.
- Cooperation between the various services that work with children and families should be developed in order to provide a holistic and integrated response to their needs.
- Investment should be increased in:
  - high-quality teaching methods using new technologies for ECEC, either in ECEC settings or for distance learning;
  - the development of age-appropriate digital learning materials to improve the cognitive development and learning of children;
  - support for the development of teachers' digital competence in the ECEC sector.

#### **ECEC staff**

- Improve the recognition, education and training, status and working conditions (including wages) of all ECEC staff, including assistants, who play a crucial role in providing high-quality education and care.
- Prioritise ECEC staff in COVID-19 management strategies (testing, equipment, vaccinations).
- Work more closely with families in order to facilitate transitions.
- Systematically inform staff of/train them on contingency plans, emergency and other non-standard procedures.

#### **Children's learning and well-being**

- Keep ECEC facilities open as much as possible, even during lockdowns, and encourage attendance of all children.
- Provide financial support to families that use subsidised school canteen services to continue to ensure adequate food intake for children during school closures.
- Raise greater awareness of the risks for young children of overexposure to screens.
- Take measures to identify potential learning loss, language developmental delays, social and emotional difficulties and ways of addressing them; train ECEC staff on how to implement these measures.
- Fund research into the long-term impact of the pandemic on children, both in terms of well-being and cognitive development.

## Introduction

Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)<sup>3</sup> is essential for the personal development, social integration, lifelong learning, and later employability of all children. Improving the quality and effectiveness of ECEC systems across Europe is therefore essential.

EU countries have affirmed in the European Pillar of Social Rights the right of children to access high-quality early childhood education and care. They have also agreed that by 2030, 96% of children between the age of three and the age of compulsory primary schooling should take part in ECEC.

Education ministers adopted a Council recommendation<sup>4</sup> for high-quality ECEC systems in May 2019, inviting EU countries to 'work towards ensuring that early childhood education and care services are accessible, affordable and inclusive'. They are invited to achieve this objective in line with the EU Quality Framework for ECEC in the areas of access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding. These areas are illustrated by 10 quality statements intended to serve as a guide for Member States in their actions to improve the quality of ECEC.



In March 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 a pandemic. Most EU countries decided to go into lockdown or to impose restrictions on various sectors of the economy/daily life, including the education and ECEC sectors. As the situation improved, lockdowns were lifted and restrictions suspended or eased over the summer. However, since then, the gravity of the situation has varied, with surges or declines in the number of COVID-19 cases, resulting in the imposition of new restrictions, new lockdowns and adjustments to measures to curb the spread of the virus. Restrictions in the education and ECEC sectors have been eased somewhat since autumn 2020 compared to how strict they were in the spring.

<sup>3</sup> ECEC refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary schooling age, which may vary across the EU.

<sup>4</sup> EUR-Lex - 32019H0605(01) - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

Given the amount of disruption to ECEC since spring 2020, it is important to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on the sector, on ECEC settings and on staff, as well as on children and their families.

This report brings together information gathered from ministries in charge of ECEC, experts, stakeholders, NGOs, the media, etc.<sup>5</sup> to describe how the pandemic was handled across Europe, and start exploring its impact and the measures adopted on the ECEC sector, ECEC institutions and staff, as well as families and children.

Readers are invited to also read the report *Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic* – NESET ([nesetweb.eu](https://nesetweb.eu)), which explores in greater detail the impact of the pandemic on ECEC in two countries, Croatia and Sweden, and three regions, Flanders (Belgium), Berlin (Germany) and Emilia-Romagna (Italy). The lessons learnt and the recommendations reflect the situation in most European countries.

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<sup>5</sup> Sources include: national reports prepared by Ecorys (economic research and consulting company) experts (unpublished), academic articles, news articles, webinars organised by national or international institutions, associations and other stakeholders (e.g. trade unions), as well as reports and position papers, and consultation of the members of the European Commission's expert group on ECEC 2018-2020 ([https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-working-groups\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-working-groups_en)). Sources are referenced throughout the report.

## Giving attention (or not) to ECEC during the pandemic

Stakeholders and observers broadly agree that **in many countries, the ECEC sector has been insufficiently supported and included in COVID-19 policy responses and measures, especially compared to other education sectors.** Observers report the following.

- The ECEC sector was often not included in discussions held by policy-makers in charge of education, who focused their efforts on (compulsory) primary, secondary and higher education.
- During lockdowns/emergencies, ECEC was most of the time only considered a childcare facility that needed to remain available for parents in 'essential' professions to be able to work. The pandemic has highlighted ECEC's essential role in supporting families and the dynamism of the labour market. And yet, it is still often regarded as little more than a babysitting service, rather than an essential part of the lifelong learning curve that lays the foundations for success in education later on in life.
- ECEC's role in learning and inclusion and children's right to education has rarely been a subject of discussion during the pandemic.

The vast majority of stakeholders and observers report that this lack of recognition has been translated into:

- a lack of practical and pedagogical guidance for ECEC settings and staff;
- a lack of support in providing equipment for ECEC settings to take the necessary COVID-19 precautions;
- a lack of equipment and guidance to ensure learning provision and support for families,
- lack of attention to the needs of ECEC staff;
- a lack of data, e.g. on children's attendance;
- a lack of research, e.g. into the impact of lockdown on children;
- a lack of experts in early childhood development contributing to discussions on COVID-19;
- financial support that has often been insufficient.

Each of these aspects is detailed in this report. The ECEC situation has also been flagged by some media<sup>6</sup>, stakeholders, NGOs and trade unions quoted throughout the report.

*'Kindergarten teachers feel left alone in the fight against the Corona crisis. They are demanding more staff, fewer children per group and clearer instructions from politics.'* *'The kindergartens have not been given too much attention in the course of the Corona crisis.'* *'There is no expert on child development, or child psychology, or early childhood education and care, in the expert group or its subgroups.'*

This lack of recognition was particularly stark in the first months of the pandemic. However, some countries have since paid more attention to ECEC and adopted corrective measures. But this is not the case everywhere and where these measures have been taken, there are worries that they may sometimes be too late or still insufficient. Weaknesses in the sector (complex governance, staff shortages, lack of funding, etc.) have been exposed, showing how much support it requires in order to give all children high-quality education and care.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of media reports: *Il Coronavirus e le coop, danni per 5 milioni al giorno in Lombardia*, Corriere della Sera, 29.2.2020. *Degli asili nido e delle scuole materne non se ne sta occupando nessuno*, L'Espresso, 21.7.2020. *How will the Covid-19 era affect our youngest citizens?*, Irish Times, 26.5.2020. *Unbeachtete Kindergärten*, Wiener Zeitung, 21/9/2020.

This reflects the global ECEC situation: the ‘forgotten child’ during discussions at UNESCO<sup>7</sup>, and described as follows by the World Bank: *‘The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep inadequacies in the current system of childcare provision, including uneven access, poor quality, the need for public finance, poor terms of employment for the workforce, and the overall vulnerability of the sector. Smart investments to support families and the childcare industry—through a variety of channels—are an essential part of recovery efforts across countries to enable parents to return to work and provide children and families with support. In many countries, this may include channelling resources to childcare providers in financial difficulty so they can reopen. As childcare services begin to reopen, some adjustments will be needed to keep children and staff safe. The experience that so many parents have had in the last few months of struggling to balance childcare and their work responsibilities may also open new opportunities, increase public empathy, and generate policy momentum to address inadequacies in childcare provision worldwide that leave so many families with limited choices and children in settings that do not ensure their safety, let alone promote development<sup>8</sup>.’*

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO webinar paints ECEC as ‘the forgotten child’ in society, calls for more attention ([thesector.com.au](https://thesector.com.au))

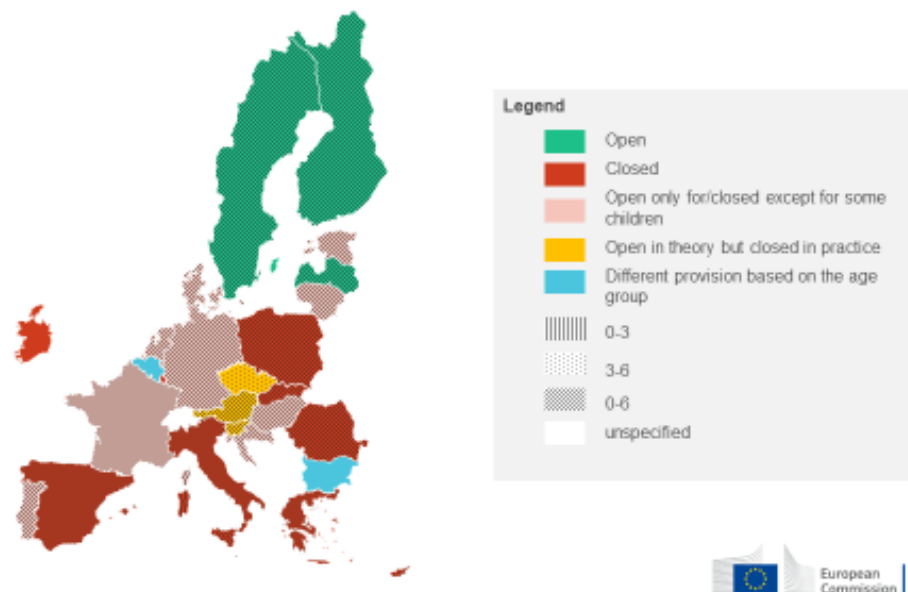
<sup>8</sup> Devercelli, A. and Beaton-Day, F., 2020, *Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital*, Washington DC, World Bank.

## ECEC provision during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns or restraining measures affected the ECEC sector throughout 2020 and in the first half of 2021. As in many other sectors, restrictions imposed by public authorities have evolved. For the most part, they were the tightest in spring 2020, when the situation was quite homogeneous, with most countries deciding to close ECEC settings for a few weeks in mid-March 2020. However, children of 'essential workers', including healthcare professionals, were often granted access to childcare services so their parents could go to work.

Observers report that even when ECEC provision was ensured, some families may have been reluctant to use the services, for fear of their children becoming sick.

### ECEC provision in the EU: situation on 1 April 2020



Since autumn 2020, decision-makers have acknowledged that the educational and social costs of closing day care centres and schools are extremely high – so high that everything must be done to avoid such closures. This is why many countries decided to leave ECEC settings open even during lockdowns.

## Impact of the pandemic on the sector

Before the pandemic, the need to invest in ECEC was largely agreed on. With the pandemic having made matters in the sector worse, **observers have expressed concerns about the financial impact the pandemic may have on current and future public investments in ECEC.** For instance in Germany, it was reported that as a result of the 'Law on the financial relief of municipalities and the new Länder', the municipalities finances will be stable until the end of 2020, enabling them to continue to perform their duties and fulfil their obligations, such as running ECEC facilities. However, they have already announced that for 2021, and probably also 2022, their financial situation will remain very straitened (with an expected deficit of EUR 10 billion in 2021 alone) and that they will certainly need to continue to benefit from the 'Municipal Solidarity Pact' (Deutscher Städtetag 2020).

**Many European countries are willing to improve the ECEC sector and are planning reforms to increase the availability, affordability and quality of provision. Innovative solutions and strong determination are needed to implement these reforms in the context of the pandemic, when consulting stakeholders' is not a simple matter, policy might focus on other areas and financial commitments may be redirected to other priorities.**

Below are some examples of how the pandemic has affected ECEC.

- In Malta, part of the implementation of the new learning outcomes framework has been put on hold. Work on national standards for the provision of ECEC services and early childhood education policy development have however proceeded, even if a bit more slowly than initially planned. In both cases, drafts have been drawn up and discussed within limited groups in the sector.
- In Latvia, the shift to the state language in minority schools and the introduction of a competence-based curriculum are both complex reforms that the pandemic has made even more difficult to implement.
- In Belgium's French-speaking community, infrastructure investments made necessary by the pandemic are making other reforms more difficult to implement (Excellence in Education Pact, teachers' prior learning).
- In Ireland, where important reforms are being prepared, e.g. for the professionalisation of the workforce, a whole new consultation strategy had to be set up to take account of the views of parents, ECEC providers and staff and other stakeholders<sup>9</sup>.
- In Slovenia, the pandemic made it difficult to implement the new shorter and free programmes: ECEC leaders reported that parents with a migrant or Roma background were hesitant to enrol their children for fear of their contracting COVID-19. In other programmes (full-day or half-day), before the pandemic, every year the number of children enrolled in kindergarten had been rising. For the first time in 2020/2021 10 000 fewer children than in the previous year were enrolled. This is 1.7% lower in the observed school year than in the previous school year<sup>10</sup>.

Across Europe and around the world, in ECEC as in many (education) sectors, **the pandemic also highlighted the lack of preparedness to deal with unexpected and sudden crises.** The NESET network has identified a difference of approach between integrated and split ECEC systems. Integrated systems seemed more 'prepared' to deal with the crisis brought on by the pandemic, because there was less need to adjust and

<sup>9</sup> Department of Children (2020), *Minister O'Gorman launches programme of consultation on a Workforce Development Plan and a new Funding Model for early learning and care and school-age childcare*, 19.8.2020.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/News/Index/9588>

negotiate amongst the different levels. By contrast, split systems did not fare as well, with the financial knock-on effect that they needed more resources to be able to deal with the crisis<sup>11</sup>.

The Regional Administration of Western Finland published a large survey on ECEC conditions during the spring 2020 wave<sup>12</sup>. The survey respondents were the directors of the ECEC institutes in 221 municipalities, i.e. 75% of all municipalities in Finland. The survey showed that the municipalities were taken unawares by the pandemic and only 38% of them had a contingency plan. Such a plan, or an update of the existing plan, was considered necessary by 90% of municipalities. They also called for support in and training on the preparation and updating of a contingency plan. The respondents felt that preparedness must be strengthened in all municipalities. However, 73% of respondents believed that instructions and support were easily accessible. Almost 90% of municipalities agreed that the adjustments that had to be made to deal with COVID-19, the implementation of early childhood education and preschool education during the pandemic, and the gradual return to normal conditions have gone fairly well. Over 90 % of municipalities considered that they had fared very well or well with local ECEC arrangements. On average, municipalities believed that they had done well in supporting children with special needs, with 37% agreeing that they had fared moderately or poorly in providing support for children with special needs.

In another study, teachers said there was a need for more thorough advance planning in preparation for future crises. Programme administrators and teacher trainers thought it could be helpful for staff to familiarise themselves with new pandemic guidelines emerging in the wake of COVID-19, including those addressing specific issues, such as protocols for school openings and protecting children from violence during crises, since family stress and economic vulnerability increase the risk of domestic violence and limit children's opportunities to seek help from teachers, social workers, and other support people<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Van Laere, K., Sharmahd, N., Lazzari, A., Serapioni, M., Brajčević, S., Engdahl, I., Heimgaertner, H., Lambert, L., Hulpia, H. (2021), 'Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic', NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/642131.

<sup>12</sup> Kyllönen, M., Liljeström, A., Sundell, T., Tahvanainen, R., Kivikangas, M. (2020), *Varhaiskasvatus, esi- ja perusopetus poikkeusolojen aikana keväällä 2020* [ECEC during the pandemic in spring], *Opetus- ja kulttuuritoimi 2020 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomen aluehallintoviraston julkaisu*.

<sup>13</sup> Pramling Samuelsson, I.; Wagner, Judith T.; Eriksen, Ø., Springer Verlag, E., 'The Coronavirus Pandemic and Lessons Learned in Preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States: OMEP Policy Forum', *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 2020.6.17.



## ECEC settings: challenges and support received

### General guidance

When the pandemic started, ECEC settings were faced with many questions on how to handle the new situation: how to keep providing high-quality education and care, how to liaise with families, how to protect the most vulnerable children, what health and safety regulations to follow and how to do so, how to manage staff, how to ensure the financial security of ECEC and ECEC employees, etc.

**In this section we look at some examples of the general guidance provided, bearing in mind that observers and stakeholders report a lot of criticisms on the provision of such general guidance. These may be that it focused solely on hygiene and safety, that it was not precise enough, that it was unrealistic or not feasible, that it did not cover all ECEC settings (only the ones for younger or older kids, only some cities, etc.). This has created a lot of uncertainty and stress amongst ECEC owners/leaders and staff, highlighting the need for coherent and efficient ECEC governance.**

### Examples of general rules and guidance

- Belgium's Dutch-speaking community has information for childcare organisers, local authorities and parents on a website, presented by category and in chronological order<sup>14</sup>. Regulations on what to do if children are sick can also be found on the website, as well as letters and posters to inform parents, and procedures for distributing internal regulations. There are additional guidelines and step-by-step plans for health check-ups and the follow-up of young children. A specific action plan has been drawn up for children in socially vulnerable situations. In a hearing of the Flemish Parliament with representatives from the childcare sector, criticism was expressed about the sometimes chaotic communication in the early days of the crisis, and the fact that step-by-step plans and scenarios were regularly adjusted (Vlaams Parlement 2020). On July 24 2020, the Growing Up Agency issued guidelines for childcare facilities, out-of-school childcare and preventive family support. These guidelines reflected an adapted approach by municipality or city, based on the colour codes yellow, orange or red<sup>15</sup>.
- Guidelines from the Municipality of Sofia (Bulgaria) recommend that children outside compulsory pre-primary education – meaning three- and four-year olds – stay home if possible<sup>16</sup>. They identify compulsory and recommended measures mostly related to sanitary and hygienic standards, frequency of airing, ventilation and disinfection of rooms, toys and utensils, physical distancing, special regulations on access for parents, working in small groups, compulsory wearing of masks or shields for pedagogic and non-pedagogic staff, limiting contacts between different groups, and social distancing in common enclosed spaces. They also contain the requirement of at least two hours of outside activities for full-day kindergarten pupils, and one hour for half-day kindergarten pupils, weather permitting. There is a clear protocol on what to do if a child or staff member shows COVID-19 symptoms, or if there are cases in a child's household, including a definition of close contacts who must be quarantined.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kindengezin.be/gezondheid-en-vaccineren/ziek/coronavirus/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.kindengezin.be/img/update-draaiboek-cb-20200724.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/v-sofiia-ot-dnes-algoritym-za-byrza-reakciia-pri-covid-19-v-uchilishte-i-detskata-gradina-2245560>

- Cyprus published a Health and Safety Protocol on the Ministry's website<sup>17</sup> after the reopening of schools on 9 June 2020. A Supplementary Health Protocol for Kindergarten<sup>18</sup> was also put in place.
- The Czech Ministry of Education published guidelines for the rest of the 2019/2020 school year on 30 April 2020. It published a manual for the 2020/2021 school year, covering nursery schools, in the middle of August (MEYS 2020a, 2020c).
- Before ECEC reopened in spring, the Danish health authorities published detailed guidelines with specific requirements on social distancing, cleaning procedures, hygiene, and maximising the amount of outside activities to reduce risk. Children have typically been organised into smaller groups, always led by the same adults.
- At the beginning of the pandemic, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research sent general instructions to kindergarten classes on how to reorganise their daily routine. The main aim was to minimise the number of contacts between people indoors. Parents were not allowed to enter buildings and the children were handed over to teachers outside (Ministry of Education and Research 2020b). No instructions were provided by the Ministry of Education and Research on the organisation of educational activities. Instead, these decisions were left to local governments or kindergarten owners.
- In France, given the decision to maintain ECEC structures open during the second wave, the government updated its COVID-19 guidance on the sanitary protocol for children in *EAJE (Covid-19 Modes d'accueil du jeune enfant)*. The guidance proposes that mother and childcare services accompany early childcare professionals working with children from birth to three, ranging from the staff at *EAJE* structures to accredited childcare assistants (*assistant(e)s en maternelle*)<sup>19</sup>. A French association also created a platform to bring together advice and resources to give ECEC staff day-to-day support<sup>20</sup>.
- In Hungary, a range of information and guidelines were provided by different ministries and organisations (EMMI, which provides professional supervision; the Hungarian State Treasury, which provides funding; the Ministry of the Interior, which supervises local government; professional organisations and associations). One set of guidelines<sup>21</sup> draws attention to the importance of frequent hand washing, teaching children cough etiquette, frequently disinfecting children's toys and equipment, etc.
- In Ireland, ahead of the widespread reopening of ECEC facilities in summer 2020, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) Health Protection Surveillance Centre produced guidance for ECEC operating during the pandemic. Building on this guidance, DCEDIY developed and published a set of support tools on a dedicated website<sup>22</sup>, including FAQs/posters/tip sheets/short videos reinforcing the key public health messages and explaining how they could be put into practice. It also facilitated regular webinars from healthcare professionals for service providers, explaining the application of measures. It produced an extensive range of resources and guidelines to prepare parents and children for the transition back to ECEC and launched the Let's Get Ready an

<sup>17</sup> [http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/ygeionomiko\\_protokollo\\_dimotikis.pdf](http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/ygeionomiko_protokollo_dimotikis.pdf)

<sup>18</sup>

[http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ygeionomiko\\_protokollo\\_nipiagogeion.pdf](http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020_08_28_ygeionomiko_protokollo_nipiagogeion.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/covid19-guide\\_ministeriel-accueil\\_0-3ans-rentree.pdf](https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/covid19-guide_ministeriel-accueil_0-3ans-rentree.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [enfance et Covid \(enfance-et-covid.org\)](https://enfance-et-covid.org)

<sup>21</sup> *Területi Közigazgatás Működtetéséért felelős helyettes államtitkár 202016057 ügyszámú 2020.03.16-án kelt tájékoztatása és gyakorlati tanácsai a COVID-19 járvány kapcsán óvodák, bölcsődék számára.* (Information and practical advice for pre-primary schools and nurseries from the Deputy State Minister for the Operation of Territorial Administration [No. 202016057] of 16 March 2020 in connection with the COVID-19 epidemic).

<sup>22</sup> <https://first5.gov.ie/guidance>

information campaign. The Let's Get Ready website<sup>23</sup> provided guidance for children and parents preparing to return to these settings, with the focus on new public health requirements introduced in response to COVID-19. To support children during the closure period in 2020, a preschool hub with free online resources was developed for use by providers, ECEC staff and parents. In advance of the reopening of all ECEC providers in September 2020, Tusla (inspection services) issued further guidance for registered providers, along the same lines as HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre advice on the safe reopening and operation of early years services during the pandemic. These were made available online<sup>24</sup>. In addition, Tusla set up an advice line to answer providers' regulatory compliance queries. It also produced a video for providers on infection control<sup>25</sup>. The inspection process was also amended in line with public health guidance on infection prevention and control. Tusla continues to review the inspection process and notify providers of any changes. In accordance with Regulation 31 of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, providers are required to notify the Inspectorate within 3 days of an incidence of COVID-19.

- Italy's Ministry of Education signed a Security Protocol<sup>26</sup> with the trade unions to guarantee the reopening of preschools and 0-3-year-old educational services for the 2020-2021 school year. It sets out rules on personal protective equipment; information and staff training; management of entrances; cleaning of places and equipment; safe management of common spaces; psycho-pedagogical support, and permanent national and regional discussion tables to monitor the application of the protocol.
- The Lithuanian National Public Health Centre (NPHC) recommendations<sup>27</sup> for the ECEC sector include advice such as: the ventilation of premises before the arrival of children and at least two more times a day; maintaining the temperature and humidity in the premises; methods for cleaning surfaces; the best ways of maintaining hand hygiene and disinfection; compulsory mask-wearing for everyone over six at the point of provision of educational services; keeping distance between groups of children playing inside and outside<sup>28</sup> (group isolation principle); conditions for consultations of educational assistance specialists.
- The Netherlands' Childcare Protocol states what safety and hygiene measures ECEC employees and childminders must take. The protocol is regularly adapted to new developments or insights. In the case of complaints about its implementation, parents can contact the childcare organisation or the parents' committee. The sectoral representative associations BMK and BK have also produced a COVID-19 Childcare Information Document.<sup>29</sup> This document, intended for owners and managers of

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1e8a3-lets-get-ready/>

<sup>24</sup> Tusla (2020) Family and community support pre-school services', accessed 20 November 2020. URL: <https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/>

<sup>25</sup> Tusla (2020) 'Infection control video', May 2020. URL:

<https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/infection-control-presentation/>

<sup>26</sup>

[https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/2432359/Protocollo\\_zerosei\\_sottoscritto\\_DEF\\_2020.pdf/871b05a0-116e-7ef7-5396-1f04f5da09dc?t=1598371352339](https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/2432359/Protocollo_zerosei_sottoscritto_DEF_2020.pdf/871b05a0-116e-7ef7-5396-1f04f5da09dc?t=1598371352339)

<sup>27</sup>

<https://nvsc.lrv.lt/uploads/nvsc/documents/files/COVID%20prevencijos%20priemones%20ugdymo%20jstaigose.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> The Minister of Health of the Republic of Lithuania – State-level emergency manager decision on necessary conditions for the organisation of pre-school education;

2020 November 6 No. V-2543. [https://e-](https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/400a2fd3203f11eb9604df942ee8e443?jfwid=t3366w)

[seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/400a2fd3203f11eb9604df942ee8e443?jfwid=t3366w](https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/400a2fd3203f11eb9604df942ee8e443?jfwid=t3366w)

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.kinderopvangtotaal.nl/bmk-en-bk-brengen-nieuw-informatiedocument-corona-uit/>

childcare organisations and childminder agencies, provides information on topics relevant to the childcare sector in the pandemic. The BMK and BK drew up the document in consultation with the childcare directorate at the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The document says that measures should only be enforced in places where they are needed, with national policy serving as a minimum. Additional measures can be enforced at local level, but they must be applied consistently. This means that a number of authorities are involved in making decisions, including childcare managers, school management, school boards, municipalities, regional safety authorities and national government (with an advisory role for the RIVM, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, and the Outbreak Management Team<sup>30</sup>).

- In Romania, kindergarten classes were included in the list of educational units benefiting from specific interventions, e.g. specific measures to assure the necessary sanitary conditions for the new school year (Romanian Government, 2020a) and specific guidelines for managers.
- The Slovak Education Ministry continuously issued guidelines for kindergarten, predominantly aimed at implementing measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, such as a Regulation Manual in October 2020.<sup>31</sup>
- In Slovenia, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the National Institute for Public Health (NIJZ)<sup>32</sup>, the National Education Institute of Slovenia (ZRSŠ) and others published regular and coordinated information updates and guidelines for kindergarten. Specific guidelines were given to pre-school teachers and parents as well – for instance on welcoming new children into kindergarten groups during the pandemic.<sup>33</sup> In June 2020 the National Education Institute prepared recommendations on re-opening kindergarten groups in special circumstances. The recommendations followed the instructions of the National Institute of Public Health. The re-opening of kindergarten in special circumstances was necessary in order to re-establish the regular pre-school education. A smaller number of children in the first age group (up to 8 children) than in the second age group (up to 10 children) was the rule. The purpose of the recommendations was to help children to regain a sense of security and confidence. The recommendations also stressed that the curriculum should be implemented in order to provide a safe, stable and healthy environment and that special attention should be given to children from vulnerable groups.

Other organisations, such as trade unions, provided guidance for ECEC settings. The Hungarian Crèche Workers Union (BDDSZ), for example, provided information and advice to crèches during the pandemic and shared good practices on its webpage, especially during the first wave. It also recommended that crèches prepare online material to support parents and that they help parents by keeping an online enrolment option open throughout the year.

Additional ECEC provision examples are provided in the section on learning continuity.

## Feedback from stakeholders

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<sup>30</sup> The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment can convene the Outbreak Management Team in the event of a trans-regional outbreak of an infectious disease or international threat. Specialists and experts with different backgrounds and knowledge of the disease in question are invited to work with the OMT.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.minedu.sk/materske-skoly-aktualizovane-23-10-2020/>

<sup>32</sup> [higienska\\_priporocila\\_za\\_vrtce\\_za\\_preprecevanje\\_sirjenja\\_sars-cov-2\\_priporocila\\_za\\_obdobje\\_ko\\_se\\_v\\_drzavi\\_pojavljajo\\_posamicni\\_primeri\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.nijz.si/higienska_priporocila_za_vrtce_za_preprecevanje_sirjenja_sars-cov-2_priporocila_za_obdobje_ko_se_v_drzavi_pojavljajo_posamicni_primeri_covid-19.pdf) (nijz.si)

<sup>33</sup> [2021-09-01-Uvajanje-otrok-v-vrtec-v-casu-epidemije\\_avg\\_sept201.pdf](https://www.zrss.si/2021-09-01-Uvajanje-otrok-v-vrtec-v-casu-epidemije_avg_sept201.pdf) (zrss.si)

- In Cyprus, the Pancyprian Association of Teachers (POED), as well as the Pancyprian Association of Parents, expressed serious concerns about the applicability and functionality of the national protocol<sup>34</sup>. Specifically, they criticized the protocol for containing ambiguities, raising many questions, including impossible provisions, and, above all, violating the pedagogical philosophy of kindergarten as a place of creative and happy learning. It also differed greatly from the health protocol for private daycare centres (as issued by the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, for children up to 4 years and children 8 months old), which was much more applicable.
- VIVE, the Danish Institute for Welfare, has undertaken a survey of a group of Danish kindergarten groups (children aged 3 to 5 years) (Mortensen, et al., 2020). Leaders from 110 kindergartens, from a total of 58 different municipalities, generally felt that they had received support from the municipal administration in connection with the implementation of the new guidelines for handling the pandemic. However, some of the respondents indicated that there had also been a lack of support. Half of the respondents felt that the support had been relevant, while 30% said it had been only partly relevant.
- In Austria, responsibility lies with the local and regional political and administrative levels to interpret national rules. In reality however, it appears that the principals of institutions had to decide how to act in an uncertain environment. In terms of supporting measures, the stakeholders felt more or less neglected: politics and policies acted mainly assuming that institutions were closed. Extra decrees were issued, suspending the compulsory ECEC attendance requirement.
- The National Education Institute of Slovenia (ZRSŠ) published comprehensive guidelines on the functioning of schools in COVID-19 conditions ('Education in the Republic of Slovenia in circumstances related to COVID-19: Models and recommendations') in August 2020. Kindergarten was not included, but could use, where appropriate, guidelines for schools by analogy. Continuous direct recommendations and guidelines were also addressed to all kindergarten principals, which were updated according to the epidemiological situation. The guidelines prepared by the National Institute for Public Health (NIJZ) in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport addressed all the issues<sup>35</sup> (from staff to play, pedagogical work, isolation, smaller groups, outdoor play, hygiene measures, etc.), giving the necessary structure for the planning of the pedagogical work. Social distancing measures and the creation of smaller groups were a feature of policy from the early stages of pandemic.
- In the Czech Republic, some principals regretted that the central authorities left nursery schools without adequate information and elementary methodological support. The Inspectorate's survey (2020) showed that, despite insufficient support in terms of information and methodology, most nursery schools were able to handle the difficult situation fairly well. In spring 2020 there was no official regulation as to how education should be guaranteed when nursery schools are out of operation over a long period of time, even though school legislation states that the last year of pre-school is compulsory. The survey also showed that many nursery schools had succeeded in deepening parents' interest in the pre-school education of their children and contributed to the understanding that nursery schools are education institutions of key importance for the development of children rather than just child-minding facilities.

<sup>34</sup> <https://paideia-news.com/poed/2020/09/18/poed-pros-prodromoy-anaprosarmoste-toys-sxediasmoys-toy-yppan-gia-prodimotiki-dimosia-nipiagogeia/>

<sup>35</sup> [higienska\\_priporocila\\_za\\_vrtce\\_za\\_preprecevanje\\_sirjenja\\_sars-cov-2\\_priporocila\\_za\\_obdobje\\_ko\\_se\\_v\\_drzavi\\_pojavljajo\\_posamicni\\_primeri\\_covid-19.pdf](https://nizj.si/higienska_priporocila_za_vrtce_za_preprecevanje_sirjenja_sars-cov-2_priporocila_za_obdobje_ko_se_v_drzavi_pojavljajo_posamicni_primeri_covid-19.pdf) (nizj.si)

## Financial aspects

**One major concern for ECEC settings from the very beginning of the pandemic was to ensure financial stability. ECEC settings' financial resources may depend on parents' fees or national and/or local resources. Many services lost income, in particular during lockdowns, then faced increased costs (e.g. cleaning). This may have given rise to financial difficulties, which may in turn jeopardise the availability of ECEC if these settings had to close definitively.**

- For instance in Ireland, in the early days of the pandemic, experts expressed concerns about the continued viability of providers, especially given requirements to implement specific measures and smaller groups in the post-COVID-19 period<sup>36</sup>.
- French networks of private crèches have drawn attention to the financial impact the crisis was having on their development and future, with the risk of aggravating the lack of childcare places across the country<sup>37</sup>.
- In Bulgaria, the media estimates the lack of revenue from ECEC fees during lockdown in Sofia at around 1 million Leva (approximately €500 000). Nurseries and kindergarten budgets were decreased as a result of the two-month closure.
- In French-speaking Belgium, according to ONE (Office de la naissance et de l'enfant – Agency for birth and children) figures<sup>38</sup>, 144 care places had already disappeared in October 2020.
- In Malta, parents do not pay anything for childcare and centres are remunerated directly by the government. With the closure of childcare centres in March 2020 during the first wave, the system was disrupted as no children were attending childcare centres, causing them to lose revenue.
- In Greece, several private kindergartens had to close completely and return tuition fees to parents.

**ECEC settings have also been faced with additional costs, often related to new/better hygiene regulations.**

- In Slovakia for instance, kindergartens complained about the insufficient supply of masks and disinfectants that had to be purchased from their budget or increased payments of parents. Some social services facilities could however apply for a subsidy, for up to €15 000 euros, e.g. to buy germicidal radiators, bio-lamps, air purifiers with filters, contactless thermometers, personal protective equipment for employees, or disinfectants.
- In principle, Bulgarian municipalities should have provided financial support for the basic disinfection of nurseries and kindergarten for their re-opening at the end of May 2020, to enable the purchase of a regular supply of disinfection materials. However, kindergarten principals reported that there was no additional funding for disinfection materials; these had to be bought from ECEC institutions' budget, which proved a challenge for smaller kindergarten settings. Face protection materials were also the responsibility of the directors of ECEC institutions. Sofia municipality reported having invested over 1 million Leva in protection materials<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> *The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people: a research review* (esri.ie).

<sup>37</sup> *Les crèches privées s'inquiètent des nouvelles habitudes de garde des parents* | Les Echos

<sup>38</sup> Parlement de la Communauté française, Commission de l'Enfance, de la Santé, de la Culture, des Médias et des Droits des femmes, Session du 20 OCTOBRE 2020.

<sup>39</sup> <https://dnes.dir.bg/obshtestvo/1-mln-lv-za-zashtitni-sredstva-na-uchitelite-v-detskite-gradini> 26 май 2020

- In the Netherlands, the sectoral representative organisations BMK and BK have signalled that because of the long waiting times for COVID-19 tests from the municipal health service GGD (childcare employees were not given priority), large numbers of commercial tests have been purchased by childcare organisations.
- Slovakian kindergartens also highlighted a lack of support for the purchase of technology and equipment for online teaching and communication with parents, which did not apply to pre-school facilities. Kindergartens mainly lacked a communication platform similar to that used by primary schools.

**Most national, regional and local governments adopted some measures to support the ECEC sector financially during the first year of the pandemic, and many have kept doing so during this second year. However, national, regional and local government responses have varied a lot, reflecting the heterogeneous and complex governance of ECEC across Europe.**

- In Austria, during spring 2020, regional/local authorities responded differently to support ECEC institutions based on their different practices<sup>40</sup>.
  - In Vienna a specific private providers' support programme supported each place by €110, overall around €7 million for 67 000 places. This should help to sustain the infrastructure, and save around 10 000 jobs in this sector.
  - One region normally supports parents' contributions by 66% and pays a yearly premium for each ECEC group (€33 000 for kindergarten, €95 000 for younger children). During the lockdown the premiums were paid and parents' support halved, with the recommendation that institutions should reduce their fee.
  - Another region also pays a premium per group (overall €230 million), with free half-day participation in the morning. The regional government demanded that afternoon fees be refunded, or not charged in the case of non-attendance.
  - Another region has also continued supporting institutions, and refunded parents some contributions to non-consumed goods (food). For private providers the fees were refunded to parents at the level of public fees.
- In Belgium, during spring 2020 (16 March to 4 May), attendance at children's care structures fell due to the lockdown. The government decided to suspend the financial participation of parents and to grant allowances to care structures, both subsidised and non-subsidised. In addition, all subsidies were maintained, regardless of the drop in attendance. These support measures represented a total of €18 million<sup>41</sup>. In an unpublished survey carried out by FeMAPE (*Fédération des Milieux d'Accueil de la Petite Enfance* – Federation of Early Childhood Care Centres) among 435 of their members, the number of respondents represents 25% of the non-subsidised sector and 4% of the subsidised sector. Taking all the different care structures, among childminder employees, an overwhelming majority say they have not suffered any loss of income. The opposite is true for childminders with an alternative status, an overwhelming majority of whom have been financially hit by the pandemic. The government maintained the support measures until August 31 with the expectation of a gradual recovery. However, FeMAPE concludes that in many cases, the financial aid granted did not compensate for the shortfall. This is because the reimbursement of childcare costs not delivered is borne by care structures, and not by the parents of absent children, as a consequence of the non-subsidised childcare providers having to add the missing sum to reimburse the parents themselves. This compensation scheme ended on 31 August 2020, but was re-instated for the last 2 months of the year.
- In Dutch-speaking Belgium, when childcare facilities were only open to children of parents in 'essential' professions and in vulnerable situations, compensatory measures

<sup>40</sup> Wiener Zeitung (8.4.2020, Martina Madner).

<sup>41</sup> <https://linard.cfwb.be/home/presse--actualites/publications/publication-presse--actualites-79.publicationfull.html>

were introduced quickly and their roll-out and payment followed quickly. UnieKO, an umbrella organisation of childcare providers, in a hearing session of the Flemish Parliament (Vlaams Parlement, 2020) indicated that if the compensation were to be discontinued, this could have consequences for the financial viability of many organisations.

- In French-speaking Belgium, a monitoring unit<sup>42</sup> was created in early May 2020 (€3.5 million of the overall budget) to support care structures in financial crisis and at risk of going bankrupt. In October 2020, the ONE decided to mobilise a global envelope of €2 million<sup>43</sup> for crisis management for the health services at school.
- In Cyprus, the ECEC sector was supported by the government in the same way as any other sector. Private kindergartens could benefit from the 'Special Scheme for Complete Suspension of Business'<sup>44</sup> or the 'Special Scheme for Partial Suspension of Business'<sup>45</sup> set up by the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance. A basic condition for participation in these schemes/plans was that none of the employees would be dismissed. Special unemployment benefit was also paid to employees in proportion to their salary.
- In spring 2021, the Czech Ministry of Social Affairs introduced a new funding package<sup>46</sup> for NGOs and other organisations that run 'children's groups', i.e. a special type of ECEC facility for children aged between 1 to 6. The funding (just over CZK 74 million or nearly €3 million) will allow children's groups to apply for a grant to cover up to half of rent expenses and additional operational costs related to COVID-19 (for example, costs of maintaining higher standards of hygiene) during 2021. Prior to this funding package, children's groups in Czechia were not able to benefit from COVID-19 financial support programmes<sup>47</sup>.
- In April 2020 the Danish Parliament agreed that additional costs incurred by the municipalities due to loss of payment of enrolment fees or expenditures to comply with the health authorities' requirements would be part of the negotiations between the government, Local Government Denmark (*Kommunernes Landsforening – KL*) and Danish regions on additional COVID-19 costs.
- The Estonian government allocated €15 million to supporting private education providers, including private kindergartens and childcare providers. The amount of support was up to €80 per child, paid up to 50% of the number of children. The support was available for a period of 3 months (March-May) (Ministry of Education and Research 2020a). A total of €406 038<sup>48</sup> was allocated from this measure to private childcare and kindergartens.
- In June 2020, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture granted EUR 84 million to be used by the municipalities to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on ECEC and in pre-primary education. These new resources have been used to hire new teachers and other staff members in ECEC institutions in order to support children's learning and to make the group size smaller (YLE, 31.7.2020<sup>49</sup>).

<sup>42</sup> <https://linard.cfwb.be/home/presse--actualites/publications/publication-presse--actualites-74.publicationfull.html>

<sup>43</sup> Commission de l'Enfance, de la Santé, de la Culture, des Médias et des Droits des femmes du Parlement de la Communauté française, Session 2020–2021.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/pliris?lang=en>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/merikis?lang=en>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.mpsv.cz/web/cz/-/detskym-skupinam-se-oteviraji-dvere-k-dotacim-dokonce-cervence-o-ne-mohou-zadat-na-mpsv>

<sup>47</sup> May 2021 developments in child and family policy in EU member states – Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion – European Commission (europa.eu).

<sup>48</sup> This information is based on written communication with the Ministry of Education and Research.

<sup>49</sup> YLE (31.7.2020), *Kotkan päiväkodeissa on liuta työpaikkoja auki – lisäksi palkataan valtion koronatuella* [In the city of Kotka, new employees have been hired for ECEC with



- In France, when ECEC settings re-opened, between 11 May and 4 July 2020, the *Caisse d'Allocations Familiales* (Family Allowances Fund) allocated €10 per open slot/per day to each setting in order to alleviate the burden of the expenses emanating from the implementation of the imposed sanitary protocols<sup>50</sup>. On the basis of a 50% occupation rate, this aid would total €100 million. Additional measures were adopted in the following months, with for instance the March 2021 action plan for early childhood education and care<sup>51</sup>.
- In France, from 14 March 2020, the maximum number of children in childcare institutions (*Établissement d'Accueil du Jeune Enfant, EAJE*) had been limited to groups of 10 during the first wave. Establishments that could not comply with this limitation had to close<sup>52</sup>. To prevent permanent closures due to loss of funding, the Family Allowances Fund (*Caisse d'Allocation Familiale, CAF*) financed *EAJEs* with €27 per closed slot/per day, with €17 for establishments employing staff with private contracts, and €3 for foster houses of accredited childcare assistants (*Maisons d'Assistants Maternels, MAM*)<sup>53</sup>. The aid scheme has been prolonged until 31 December 2020<sup>54</sup>. The government announced the allocation of €450 million during the first wave of the pandemic for the aid scheme and the salary contribution to accredited childcare assistants whose employment would only be partially maintained (*chômage partiel*)<sup>55</sup>.

the state COVID-19 grant], YLE [Finnish broadcasting company]: <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11470280>

<sup>50</sup> Escudié, J. (2020), Deconfinement: the CAF maintains all its aid to childcare and votes for aid for the opening of childcare centres (*Déconfinement : la Cnaf maintient toutes ses aides aux modes de garde et vote une aide à l'ouverture des crèches*), *La Banque des Territoires*: <https://www.banquedesterritoires.fr/deconfinement-la-cnaf-maintient-toutes-ses-aides-aux-modes-de-garde-et-vote-une-aide-louverture-des>

<sup>51</sup>

[https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/Documents/DCom/circulaire\\_IT\\_LR/C%202021-004.pdf](https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/Documents/DCom/circulaire_IT_LR/C%202021-004.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> CAF (2020a), FAQ COVID-19 Exceptional Aid to *EAJE* (FAQ Covid-19 Aide exceptionnelle aux *EAJE*):

<https://medias.amf.asso.fr/upload/files/Covid19%20FAQ%20EAJE%20PSU.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Lelièvre, C. (2020a), The CAF continues to provide aid for places closed in nurseries and MAM, (*La Cnaf poursuit les aides aux places fermées en crèches et MAM*), *Les Pro de la Petite Enfance*: <https://lesprodelapetiteenfance.fr/la-cnaf-poursuit-les-aides-aux-places-fermees-en-creeches-et-mam>

<sup>54</sup> CAF (2020b), Support by CAF for childcare establishments and childcare assistants' homes during the COVID-19 public health crisis (*Accompagnement par les Caf des établissements d'accueil du jeune enfant et des maisons d'assistants maternels durant la crise sanitaire Covid-19*):

[https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/Documents/DCom/Quisommesns/Textes%20de%20r%C3%A9f%C3%A9rence/Circulaires/LC%2012%202020\\_Covid%20Petite%20enfance.pdf](https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/Documents/DCom/Quisommesns/Textes%20de%20r%C3%A9f%C3%A9rence/Circulaires/LC%2012%202020_Covid%20Petite%20enfance.pdf); Escudié, J. (2020), Deconfinement: the CAF maintains all its aid to childcare and votes for aid for the opening of childcare centres (*Déconfinement : la Cnaf maintient toutes ses aides aux modes de garde et vote une aide à l'ouverture des crèches*), *La Banque des Territoires*: <https://www.banquedesterritoires.fr/deconfinement-la-cnaf-maintient-toutes-ses-aides-aux-modes-de-garde-et-vote-une-aide-louverture-des>

<sup>55</sup> '*Chômage partiel*' is a government aid scheme set up during lockdown for companies whose employees cannot work completely efficiently. In these cases, the government pays part of their salaries, which, nevertheless, does not constitute full salaries in normal circumstances.

<sup>56</sup> Mateus, C. (2020), Dubos, C., 'Parents do not have to pay for a childcare centre if their place is left empty during the crisis', (Christelle Dubos: «*Les parents n'ont pas à payer une place de crèche laissée vide pendant la crise*»), *Le Parisien*. <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/christelle-dubos-les-parents-n-ont-pas-a-payer-une->

According to the CAF, between 16 March and 10 May, a total of 12 500 establishments with a total average of 427 000 places benefited from exceptional aid each week (94% of places)<sup>57</sup>.

- In Germany, the Federal Parliament adopted two supplementary budgets, amounting to almost €150 billion for 2020. These were complemented by those of the 16 *Länder*. The money is spent on a broad variety of support programmes that include e.g. municipalities and private ECEC providers. The Bavarian government, for instance, announced in March the payment of lump sums to crèches and kindergarten for 3 months to compensate for the COVID-related closures: €300 for a child in crèche, €200 for a child in daycare, and €150 for a child in kindergarten. In June 2021, the federal government announced the extension of national and regional funding<sup>58</sup>.
- In Hungary, in both the spring and autumn lockdowns, the government introduced general protection measures which extended to nurseries and pre-primary schools. The financing aspects of these measures were mainly related to the costs of centrally organised containment through which, for example, disinfectants were provided to the institutions; as well as the costs of paying the salaries and sickness benefits of sick or quarantined employees or remote workers of closed institutions. In addition to this, no formal funding measure was taken specifically for nurseries or pre-primary schools. However, the government (the Hungarian State Treasury) started to use a different calculation basis to finance ECEC services after the spring closure: from 16 March 2020 to 31 August 2020, funding was not calculated on the basis of actual daily use of services, but on the number of children enrolled. Thus, during the period of closure, there was no less public funding and no loss of revenue. This provided operational security and made it possible to finance additional burdens (e.g. disinfection and the procurement of PPE). In the autumn, in relation to infection, only general financial measures came into force again concerning salaries, sickness benefits and other benefits for various cases of lockdown affecting companies, organisations and institutions, but these do not address ECEC institutions specifically. They affect them only if an employee is absent due to infection, or the institution has to be temporarily closed due to a spreading infection.
- In Ireland, a range of financial supports were provided to ECEC services during the pandemic, including both economy-wide supports and ECEC-specific supports. Financial supports included funding to support the sustainability of services, including the retention of staff, as well as funding to meet the additional costs of re-opening. The largest financial support was provided through the Irish Revenue Commissioner's Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)<sup>59</sup>, providing a subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of eligible employees on the employer's payroll and gross pay to employees. The EWSS replaced the initial COVID-19 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) from 1 September 2020 and until at least September 2021. Given the regulatory requirement for ECEC providers to comply with minimum adult-

[place-de-creche-laissee-vide-pendant-la-crise-17-06-2020-8336925.php](https://www.ladepêche.fr/2020/06/17/des-creches-ont-continue-a-faire-payer-les-parents-pendant-le-confinement,8936493.php); *La Dépêche* (2020), Childcare centres continued to charge parents during confinement (*Des crèches ont continué à faire payer les parents pendant le confinement*): <https://www.ladepêche.fr/2020/06/17/des-creches-ont-continue-a-faire-payer-les-parents-pendant-le-confinement,8936493.php>

<sup>57</sup> Lelièvre, C. (2020b), The CAF voted for new aid for childcare centres (*La Cnaf a voté de nouvelles aides pour les crèches*), *Les Pro de la Petite Enfance*: <https://lesprodelapetiteenfance.fr/la-cnaf-vote-de-nouvelles-aides-pour-les-creches>; <https://www.ladepêche.fr/2020/06/17/des-creches-ont-continue-a-faire-payer-les-parents-pendant-le-confinement,8936493.php>

<sup>58</sup> BMFSFJ – New deadlines for kindergarten expansion under pandemic conditions come into force

<sup>59</sup> Revenue Commissioners (2020), 'Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme', October 2020: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/ewss/index.aspx>

child ratios and public health restrictions on the mixing of groups of children, ECEC providers were granted a special exemption from the standard EWSS condition that a business must have experienced at least a 30% reduction in turnover in the context of COVID-19. On average the scheme covered 80% of the payroll costs of individual ECEC services (about 50% of total operating costs), allowing them to remain financially sustainable even with a significant reduction in occupancy<sup>60</sup>. Providers have also been able to apply for a 'sustainability fund', accessible to those (not-for-profit and for-profit) who could demonstrate that the other measures were not sufficient by themselves to enable the viable operation of their business. The continued financial support has benefited parents as well as providers, by limiting the need for providers to pass on increased costs to parents through increased fees.

- Italy put in place the following financial measures for charter schools that are closed but continue activities with distance learning:
  - funds to buy materials for extraordinary cleaning, as well as protective equipment and personal hygiene;
  - €2 million to enhance distance learning (platforms, digital tools, especially to support disadvantaged students);
  - suspension of tax payments, contributions and VAT until 30 April 2020, with the possibility of instalments from May;
  - the legislative decree of May 2020 allocating €165 million to ECEC settings (0-6 years) managed by the private sector and municipalities, to compensate for the loss of fees during lockdown.

Despite some difficulties, these contributions made it possible to support, from the first months of the 2020/2021 school year, about half of the educational services surveyed by ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) in 2018 (6 310 out of 12 756). Almost all pre-schools had received the contribution by February 2021, as reported by the Ministry of Education<sup>61</sup>. The National Fund for Integrated Systems 0-6 has also been increased by €15 million (from 249 million to 264 million and then 309 million)<sup>62</sup>.

- In Poland, ECEC facilities run by private owners, including physical persons, could apply for general government support under the 'shield' regulations to support companies' liquidity (Financial Shield Polish Development Fund) and jobs (though there is no requirement to maintain jobs after the subsidy period). Self-employed people and micro-companies could also be exempt from paying social insurance contributions and several other mandatory insurance payments for up to 3 months if their revenue declined. New regulations with the second wave of COVID-19 focused on specific economic sectors that were particularly hit by lockdown measures (i.e. hotels, restaurants, fitness facilities) and did not cover the ECEC sector. One measure for beneficiaries of the 'Toddler+' programme was the waiver of the requirement regarding the admission of children to newly established places in ECEC facilities (for children aged 0-2 years). During the pandemic and up to 6 months after it officially ends, such places can remain empty. Funding provided to institutions to establish new places or expand existing facilities in 2020 can be used up to November 2021.
- In Slovakia, facilities educating and caring for children up to 3 years and focusing on 'services to support the harmonisation of family and professional life' are usually private and depend on parental fees, but the law says that they cannot educate and care for the children of non-working or non-studying parents. Such facilities were therefore at risk of losing clients in the case of higher unemployment or a more widespread tendency to stay at home and not work. Lockdown has jeopardised the existence of several pre-school facilities so much that the Minister for Education spoke of the threat

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/9b9d8-minister-announces-new-funding-arrangements-to-support-delivery-of-early-learning-and-childcare-during-extended-level-5-restrictions/>

<sup>61</sup> [1dcd7b63-0151-ac71-9396-366e441b66f2 \(miur.gov.it\)](https://www.miur.gov.it/1dcd7b63-0151-ac71-9396-366e441b66f2)

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/piano-di-azione.html>

of the demise of some facilities when announcing<sup>63</sup> a measure to secure funds for remuneration. Both non-state schools and school facilities (i.e. including kindergartens) were entitled to a financial subsidy from cities and municipalities of at least 88%, as well as receiving 80% of the wage subsidy under the 'First Aid' package. The childcare allowance, which is paid directly to the parent to pay for institutional care, was paid even if childcare was not provided by the facility, to prevent ECEC staff from losing their jobs and endangering the facility's finances.

- In Slovenia, the government provided financial compensation for the loss of income of kindergartens, waiving fees for parents whose children did not attend kindergarten due to closure or limited opening during spring 2020. Thanks to these measures, kindergartens did not experience financial difficulties. The same measure applied during the summer if kindergartens operating normally had to close temporarily for quarantine; until September 2020 the amount paid to kindergartens was already over €20 million. In February 2021, the Minister for Education adopted Rules on the Methodology of Financing Protective Equipment and Disinfecting Premises for Service Providers in Education and Science<sup>64</sup> from the state budget. Funding criteria are the number of employees and the number of children or pupils, taking into account the standard costs per employee and per child or pupil. The period of financing the eligible costs of protective equipment runs from 1 March 2021 until the end of the measures requiring the mandatory use of personal protective equipment and disinfection of premises.
- In Spain, the impact of school closures has been very severe in the case of 0-3 ECEC private schools. According to ACADE (the Association of Private Schools)<sup>65</sup>, without financial support from public administrations, this sector would be in jeopardy. The association reports that 10% of private 0-3 ECEC schools have already closed down. Autonomous Communities of Andalusia, Castilla y León, Galicia, Madrid and Valencia normally distribute checks or school vouchers to parents to enrol their children at this education stage. During lockdown, these were converted into direct aid for private schools closed due to the pandemic. For example, Madrid approved €18 million of aid<sup>66</sup>; in Cataluña, direct aid was granted<sup>67</sup> to 0-3 ECEC private schools in order to mitigate the impact of their forced closure and the ban on re-opening. In the Balearic Islands, the regional government devoted €4 million to increasing the amount per pupil that city councils receive, as owners of public ECEC schools. In addition, €420 000 was spent to subsidise vulnerable families whose children attend private ECEC schools<sup>68</sup>.
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## Staffing

**During the pandemic, ECEC centres in a number of countries were understaffed owing to workplace absences and difficulty in recruiting and retaining workers; this created short or longer-term staffing problems.**

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/branislav.grohling/posts/2934068896676537/>

<sup>64</sup> Pravilnik o metodologiji financiranja zaščitne opreme in dezinfekcije prostorov izvajalcem storitev na področju vzgoje, izobraževanja in znanosti (pisrs.si)

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.lainformacion.com/espana/sos-guarderias-crisis-solo-vienen-100-ninos-400-posibles/2819622/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://gaceticmadrid.com/2020/05/10/la-comunidad-de-madrid-destinara-18-millones-de-euros-a-paliar-los-efectos-economicos-del-covid-19-en-las-escuelas-infantiles/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://portaldogc.gencat.cat/utillsEADOP/PDF/8182/1805655.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.caib.es/pidip2front/jsp/es/ficha-noticia/strongeducacioacuten-destinaraacute-8-millones-para-la-creacioacuten-y-consolidacioacuten-de-plazas-puacuteblicas-de-0-3-antildeos-en-balearesstrong1>

There was a high level of workplace absences for a range of pandemic-related reasons: some workers contracted the virus, others were in the 'vulnerable' category, others again had to quarantine as 'close contacts' and/or were waiting for test results. In the French-speaking part of Belgium, UNESSA<sup>69</sup> (Union En Soins de Santé - Health Care Union) reported that during the second wave (autumn 2020), staff absences in some ECEC teams reached 30%. In Austria the pressure on the ECEC sector was also reported to be very high, primarily owing to staffing gaps<sup>70</sup>.

**The high absence rates may have compounded recurrent staff-shortage issues. Because of the lack of staff, some ECEC settings had to close temporarily, while others were unable to follow national regulations (e.g. on working with smaller groups of children) or had to employ underqualified staff.**

Some countries adopted measures to address staff shortages by allowing temporary staff – e.g. students in education – work in ECEC centres.

- The Dutch Government allowed temporary workers to assist teaching staff, reducing overload that might result in further absences. The support provided by temporary staff included e.g. group help and help with transporting children to and from day care. The temporary staff concerned were deployed outside their regular occupation and had to meet a number of quality requirements.
- In December 2020, the Slovenian Ministry of Education adopted a decision on emergency measures in personnel administration for smooth operations of educational institutions<sup>71</sup>. The decision created a new staff category: maintainer of learning technology, and/or maintainer of computer equipment. The decision also addressed a potential lack of teachers in kindergartens and schools owing to COVID-19 measures: in the 2020/2021 school year, kindergartens and schools were allowed to temporarily replace absent teachers with mentored students of teaching studies. The teachers' trade union SVIZ objected to this decision and proposed that apprentice teachers with appropriate education should be employed instead. The Act determining the intervention measures to mitigate the consequences of the second wave of the COVID-19 (November 2020<sup>72</sup>) introduced certain measures in the field of employment: employers in the public sector could conclude fixed-term employment contracts without announcing vacancies, but for a maximum period until 31 August 2021; and fixed-term employment contracts in the field of education could be concluded with candidates who had not yet passed the compulsory professional examination in education as long as they met other conditions for pursuing the profession. In accordance with the act, kindergartens and basic schools also received additional funding for the roles of 'computer operator - organiser of IT activities' in basic schools and 'technical worker - maintainer of learning technology or computer equipment' in kindergartens.
- In Luxembourg, in June and July 2020 some 300 students of the University of Luxembourg's *Bachelor en Sciences de l'Éducation* (BScE) course were hired by the Ministry of Education to support educators in the ECEC sector. The students assisted the educators in work with children's groups, enabling group sizes to be reduced.

<sup>69</sup> Commission de l'Enfance, de la Santé, de la Culture, des Médias et des Droits des femmes du Parlement de la Communauté Française Session 2020–2021.

<sup>70</sup> *Standard* 2.11.2020, Rosa Winkler-Hermaden) 'CORONA-KRISE. Kindergarten und Corona: "Die Pädagoginnen sind an der Leistungsgrenze" – Nicht nur in Schulen, auch in Kindergärten geht der Betrieb im November weiter – Expertinnen schlagen wegen Personalengpässen Alarm'.

<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000121373821/kindergarten-und-corona-die-paedagoginnen-sind-an-der-leistungsgrenze>.

<sup>71</sup> <http://pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=SKLE12258>.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO8272>.

## Impact on staff

The qualifications of staff who work in early childhood education and care vary greatly. Even before the pandemic the sector experienced difficulties, including lack of recognition and staff shortages; there was already a need to make the ECEC profession more attractive, in particular through better working conditions and salaries<sup>73</sup>. **The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted or exacerbated existing problems, leading to renewed calls by ECEC professionals for issues to be addressed and working conditions to be improved. Problems in the sector concern staff health and safety, employment and financial issues, possible job losses, general working conditions and professional development.**

### Health and safety

In a context where knowledge about the COVID-19 virus and means of transmission was limited and sometimes contradictory, **media and trade unions in Europe consistently reported ECEC staff's fears of contracting the virus and their calls for better protection. ECEC staff highlighted the impossibility of maintaining physical distance and the difficulty of wearing masks when working with very young children. Workers in the ECEC sector called to be recognised as a priority category for regular testing and for vaccination, or for children to be tested more frequently, but national/local responses were often late and/or negative.**

Examples of such reports include:

- In the Netherlands, the sectoral representative organisations BMK and BK reported that large numbers of commercial COVID-19 tests were being purchased by childcare organisations themselves owing to long waiting times for COVID tests provided by the municipal health service.
- The Hungarian Democratic Union of Crèche Workers (BDDSZ) underlined that protective equipment often had to be bought by ECEC staff themselves<sup>74</sup>. In March 2021, BDDSZ published an open letter to demand testing and vaccination priority for childcare workers.
- In the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, UnieKO reported that uncertainties about protection measures made childcare staff very insecure.
- In the French-speaking part of Belgium, FeMAPE deplored the fact that COVID-19 tests were not administered to children under 5 years old, even when many of them had symptoms, so they were not identified as infected and remained in care structures.
- In Bulgaria, a survey conducted by the 'Education' Syndicate with Podkrepa Confederation of Labour showed that 44% of kindergarten teachers were afraid of going back to work, though only 10% declared their intention not to return<sup>75</sup>.
- The Regional Administration of Western Finland conducted a broad survey on ECEC conditions during the spring wave of the pandemic<sup>76</sup>. The endangered occupational health of teachers and of other staff and principals, and the prospect of the long-term consequences, pointed to a situation of major concern that required action.

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<sup>73</sup> *Early childhood education and care: how to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff*, Publications Office of the EU (europa.eu).

<sup>74</sup> 'Protective equipment is often to be bought by nursery workers', Viktoria Szűcs | BDDSZ.

<sup>75</sup> Survey conducted by the Syndicate Education with Podkrepa Confederation of Labour, p. 13 COVID file.

<sup>76</sup> Kyllönen, M., Liljeström A., Sundell T., Tahvanainen R., Kivikangas M. (2020). *Varhaiskasvatus, esi- ja perusopetus poikkeusolojen aikana keväällä 2020 [ECEC during the pandemic in spring]*, Opetus- ja kulttuuritoimi 2020 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomen aluehallintoviraston julkaisu.

An interesting German study presents ECEC staff views on how to design and implement preventive measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission within childcare facilities<sup>77</sup>.

## Employment and financial issues

**A number of measures were adopted by national or local decision-makers to protect ECEC staff and enable them to keep their job and (most of) their salary. Some measures also concerned sick leave and annual leave. However, not all countries adopted such measures, or if they did, the measures did not always cover all ECEC staff and were not always sufficient to prevent loss of salaries or jobs.**

- In the French-speaking part of Belgium, in the early childhood sector many people have self-employed (independent) status and as such benefit from an advantageous collective agreement with the tax authorities (Article 37<sup>78</sup>). However, they do not pay contributions and thus do not have social cover. As a result, during the COVID-19 crisis, workers with Article 37 status could not benefit from the 'gateway right', the replacement income for the self-employed.
- In Bulgaria, pedagogical and non-pedagogical staff received respectively 10 and 20 days of additional paid leave as compensation for the enforced leave during the two-month ECEC closure. Pedagogical staff who contracted COVID-19 were provided with an additional 10 days of paid leave to ensure proper recovery.
- In Croatia there were no national financial measures targeting ECEC institutions, since ECEC financing is under the authority of local and regional governments. In October 2020, the City of Zagreb and three main ECEC trade unions (trade union of workers in preschool education in Croatia, trade union for education, media and culture and trade union for education) signed an agreement<sup>79</sup> to provide additional funds for ECEC teachers in self-isolation or on sick leave owing to COVID-19 infection. This ensures that ECEC teachers on sick leave because of COVID-19 receive their full monthly salary (instead of 85% in other circumstances).
- In Cyprus, all public-sector teachers were paid as usual for this specific period of time. Teachers working in private early childhood education were financially supported under the national economic support package (support programme for coping with the effects of COVID-19)<sup>80</sup>.
- In April 2020, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research and the Ministry of Finance advised local governments not to cut salaries and investments planned for 2020 and promised to provide support for revenue base stabilisation to alleviate the impact of the crisis on local government budgets. The guidelines strongly advised municipalities not to reduce the salaries of municipal kindergarten teachers. Despite this, some municipalities did reduce kindergarten teachers' salaries and other

<sup>77</sup> Diebig, M., Gritzka, S., Dragano, N. *et al.* 'Presentation of a participatory approach to develop preventive measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission in childcare', *J Occup Med Toxicol* 16, 26 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12995-021-00316-0>.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.liantis.be/fr/devenir-independent/conditions-starter/statut-social/assimilation-article-37>.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.srpoooh.hr/>.

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period1?lang=en>;  
<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period2?lang=en>;  
<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period3?lang=en>;  
<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period4?lang=en>;  
<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period5?lang=en>;  
<https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/period6?lang=en>.

kindergarten staff salaries on the grounds that it was not possible to provide them with full-time work during the emergency period<sup>81</sup>.

- In Hungary, the government and the supervising ministry interpreted the employment laws<sup>82</sup> in such a way that during the extraordinary break, principals could order employees (including ECEs, nurses and support staff of pre-primary schools and nurseries) to stay at home with appropriate legal references so that employees were not disadvantaged in terms of salary or sickness and other benefits in the event of illness. The employees concerned thus received full pay for working at home during the enforced break; if someone is infected at work (defined as 'occupational sickness'), full sickness benefit is paid (100% of the employee's wage) if they obtain the administration's agreement; the benefit for non-occupational sicknesses is usually 50%-60% of the wage). However, where an employee has to quarantine as a 'close contact', they are considered 'incapable of work' and so receive sickness benefit of only 60% of their salary. Unions also lobbied for eligibility for sick leave (or some other form of compensation) for parents unable to work when they had to stay at home to look after their children during lockdown, but this was not accepted by the government<sup>83</sup>. During the first wave, the government also lifted the rule that tied payment of the per capita subsidy for crèches to the children's continuous attendance, in order to facilitate payment of care workers' wages. The rule was reinstated in January 2021, but lifted again in July with retroactive effect to 1 January.
- In Italy, during lockdown periods, state school staff continued to work by means of distance education where possible. Their salary was paid as normal. For staff working in private settings, special measures were introduced to support workers in the event of job loss, such as social safety nets or wage subsidies.
- The Maltese Government continued to pay state and church-sector teachers their normal salaries. In the case of independent schools, parents were reluctant to pay school fees if the schools were closed. To maintain these schools and support remote learning, the government agreed to a 35% fee reduction during the last term of the 2019/2020 school year. Under the agreement, educators working in private schools were to receive an EUR 800 wage subsidy as they continued to provide online learning. The agreement also covered private childcare centres, which were also encouraged to provide some learning experiences remotely (MaltaToday, 2020).
- The Dutch Central Planning Bureau (CPB) announced an unemployment rate of 7% in 2021<sup>84</sup>. This figure may well include job losses in the childcare sector in 2021: as child day care is mainly for children whose parents work, an increase in unemployment results in a decrease in ECEC use. The number of average childcare hours per child also decreases, since parents may work fewer hours, wish to save money, and therefore reduce their day care contract (e.g. from 3 to 2 days). According to the Childcare Guarantee Fund<sup>85</sup>, the COVID-19 crisis is not only a health crisis but also an economic

<sup>81</sup> Vapper, T., (2020). *Enamik valdu ei ole lasteaednike palgakärbetega kaasa läinud*. 'Most municipalities have not been accompanied by salary cuts for kindergarten teachers, Õpetajate Leht, 8.05.2020. <https://opleht.ee/2020/05/enamik-valdu-ei-ole-lasteaednike-palgakarbetega-kaasa-lainud/>.

<sup>82</sup> Munka törvénykönyve (Code of Labour), Közalkalmazottak jogállásáról szóló törvény (Civil Service Law), Egészségbiztosítási törvény (Health Insurance Act).

<sup>83</sup> <https://szakszervezet.net/hu/2014-04-03-13-35-01/1414-a-maszsz-otpontos-csomagja>; <https://szakszervezet.net/hu/2014-04-03-13-35-01/1412-a-magyar-szakszervezeti-szovetseg-javaslati-a-novekvo-munkanelkuliseg-okozta-nehezsegek-lekuzdesere> (April 2020).

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.cpb.nl/juniraming-2020>.

<sup>85</sup> The Childcare Guarantee Fund (Waarborgfonds Kinderopvang) was founded in 1998 as a provider of guarantees to banks that finance childcare organisations. Over the years, it also developed a knowledge role to encourage responsible investment. Partly at the initiative of the PO Council, VO Council and VNG, a new knowledge centre for education



crisis. The director at the Childcare Guarantee Fund expects that the demand for carers will continue for the time being, but that conditions will change; he also considers it useful to take a critical look at the growing number of rules in childcare<sup>86</sup>.

- The Portuguese Ministry of Education allowed the extension of fixed-term contracts with non-teaching staff from schools, day care centres and public kindergartens to respond to the increased demands arising from hygiene and safety guidelines<sup>87</sup>.
- In Romania, private institutions benefited from general measures to address the COVID-19 crisis. For example, staff salaries were partially covered (RON 2 500/EUR 500) for re-employed employees in specific age groups (below 26 and above 50 years old), and during emergency situations workers with suspended contracts were provided with food coupons.
- On 31 March 2020, the Slovak Government decided<sup>88</sup> to support maintenance employment during the crisis. It reallocated EUR 197 million to the new European Social Fund (ESF) project of the human resources operational programme proposed by MoLSAF (the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family). The project compensated employers' loss of income by giving them a financial contribution to cover part of wage costs. The self-employed were also supported under the project. A report written in English by the Ministry's Employment Policy Institute sets out the 'first aid' results between 31 March and 31 July<sup>89</sup>. On 15 July 2020, the government approved the extension of the 'first aid'<sup>90</sup> employment aid measure. In cooperation with the education and labour ministries, the ESF project 'Support for maintaining employment in kindergartens'<sup>91</sup> was developed with a budget of EUR 86.31 million; it aimed at maintaining approximately 22 000 jobs in kindergartens. A financial contribution was provided to cover 80% of gross monthly wages, up to a maximum of EUR 1 100 per kindergarten employee from 13 March 2020 to 30 June 2020.
- In Slovenia, there have been various changes to teacher pay and benefits. When kindergartens were closed, preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants waiting for work at home were entitled to salary compensation of 80% of their pay, but not less than the amount of the minimum wage. For work in the workplace at the time of the declared epidemic, public employees were entitled to an allowance for work in risky situations and an allowance for hazards and special burdens; this was also the case for preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants. The allowance is determined by the Act on the public-sector salary system, the public-sector collective agreement, and the Act determining the intervention measures to contain the COVID-19 epidemic and mitigate its consequences for citizens and the economy. The amount of the allowance is determined by the school head. Both allowances together cannot exceed 100% of the basic hourly salary rate.

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and municipalities was established in 2012: Ruimte-OK. The Guarantee Fund and Ruimte-OK operate separately from each other, cooperating where necessary.

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.kinderopvangtotaal.nl/martin-van-osch-werkgevers-houd-je-medewerkers-in-dienst/>.

<sup>87</sup> Decree-Law No 68/2020, 2020-09-15, <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/142870335>.

<sup>88</sup> <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/24674/1>.

<sup>89</sup> Buchel, O. et al. (2020) 'First Aid' for Slovakia: Updated report on the economic policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic. MoLSAF July 2020, available at [https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/ministerstvo/analyticke-centrum/analyticke-komentare/spi\\_first\\_aid\\_sr\\_aug2020\\_final.pdf](https://www.employment.gov.sk/files/slovensky/ministerstvo/analyticke-centrum/analyticke-komentare/spi_first_aid_sr_aug2020_final.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1181985/tb-b-grohlinga-a-m-krajniaka-o-pomoci-pre-materske-skoly.html>.

<sup>91</sup> [www.pomahameludom.sk](http://www.pomahameludom.sk).

## Increased workload and stress; lack of recognition

### **ECEC professionals have reported that their workload and stress increased when the pandemic began.**

#### **The increased workload was partly due to the need to adopt new ways of working.**

For instance, researchers report on a Norwegian kindergarten where staff members continued to work during the shutdown. They took turns supervising a small number of children of essential workers on-site, trying to make the situation as normal as possible for the children. At the same time, staff needed to work out how to use the digital staff handbook, digital deviation notifications, and various online platforms and applications. They created short videos of themselves singing and reading stories to the children. They also talked with all children and parents at least once during the 6-week shutdown and made more frequent calls to those who wanted or needed more contact. They also contacted the child welfare service and the health centre about children and families who needed extra attention and support<sup>92</sup>. Additional tasks may have included more cleaning.

#### **The increased workload was also reinforced by increased workplace absences in a sector where staff shortages were already common before the pandemic.**

For instance, a Dutch report highlighted that owing to COVID-19 rules and regulations, some employees could not come in to work, e.g. employees waiting for the result of a COVID test, employees (or a housemate) belonging to an at-risk group, or employees more than 28 weeks pregnant. On average, this represented around 8% of the staff of organisations.

**Stress levels also increased due to COVID-related fears as described above, a (perceived) lack of support by ECEC leaders, employers and decision-makers, and lack of guidance on how to handle the situation. A number of ECEC staff also expressed their disappointment at the lack of recognition they received.** This has been highlighted through many testimonies, surveys and trade union statements:

- Austrian trade unions have highlighted the topic of insecurity, and surveys have shown a high degree of insecurity among ECEC staff<sup>93</sup>.
- In the French-speaking part of Belgium, ECEC staff working in crèches criticised the fact that national guidance and recognition focused mainly on kindergartens rather than on structures working with younger children<sup>94</sup>.
- Croatian research data<sup>95</sup> showed that preschool teachers have significantly higher work intensity and worse working hours, with a negative impact on their health. Teacher trade unions have called for the workload of ECEC teachers to be eased; local

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<sup>92</sup> 'The Coronavirus pandemic and lessons learned in preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States', OMEP Policy Forum - Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid; Wagner, Judith T; Eriksen Ødegaard, Elin. Springer Verlag. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 2020-06-17.

<sup>93</sup> APA-OTS (6.5.2020) ÖGB Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund yunion: '64 Prozent des Kindergarten-Personals hat Sorge vor Ansteckung, 90 Prozent wünschen sich ein bundeseinheitliches Rahmengesetz'.

[https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20200506\\_OTS0042/youunion-64-prozent-des-kindergarten-personals-hat-sorge-vor-ansteckung](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20200506_OTS0042/youunion-64-prozent-des-kindergarten-personals-hat-sorge-vor-ansteckung) ; APA-OTS (17.11.2020) yunion: 'In einem Viertel der Kindergärten trat bereits ein Corona-Fall auf'.  
[https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20201117\\_OTS0037/youunion-in-einem-viertel-der-kindergaerten-trat-bereits-ein-corona-fall-auf](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20201117_OTS0037/youunion-in-einem-viertel-der-kindergaerten-trat-bereits-ein-corona-fall-auf).

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.rtbef.be/info/societe/detail\\_fermeture-des-ecoles-debat-sur-les-maternelles-et-les-creches-dans-tout-ca?id=10727268](https://www.rtbef.be/info/societe/detail_fermeture-des-ecoles-debat-sur-les-maternelles-et-les-creches-dans-tout-ca?id=10727268).

<sup>95</sup> (ed) Ivšić, Jaklin (2020.), 'Raditi u dječjim vrtićima: Rezultati istraživanja uvjeta rada u ranom i predškolskom odgoju i obrazovanju', SOMK, Zagreb; research results: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FULytFNqPnM&t=16s&ab\\_channel=Radni%C4%8DKapravaTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FULytFNqPnM&t=16s&ab_channel=Radni%C4%8DKapravaTV).

authorities and ECEC institutions were responsible for deciding how to handle matters on a case-by-case basis. The president of the Federation of Independent Unions of Croatia, Mr Mladen Novosel, pointed out that social dialogue is crucial in such pandemic conditions.

- An Irish survey of ECEC staff in late 2020 showed that 74% of workers found their work stressful in these difficult times: '98% of early years educators have not felt they are valued by government as frontline workers during the COVID-19 crisis and only 10% have received a bonus or additional pay from their employer during the pandemic', and '93% of respondents [state] they will leave the sector within 5 years if conditions don't improve'<sup>96</sup>.
- A Polish survey among kindergarten teachers (Jaskulska, Jankowiak & Rybińska, 2020) showed that respondents felt positive emotions more often than negative emotions, in relation both to the children they work with and to the children's parents/guardians. However, while 30% of respondents felt they were supported by management, 22% did not feel supported by their superiors – one of the least positive results of the study. Teachers' experiences also depended on their seniority and the type of facility. The youngest teachers experienced negative emotions more often and were the least likely to declare that they would use skills acquired during distance learning in the future. The longer the teacher's professional experience, the more they saw an increase in their professional competences and the more they felt supported by management. Teachers working in non-public kindergartens saw greater potential to influence children's cognitive and social development in the form of distance education than those in public kindergartens. They also declared – more often than teachers from public institutions – that their relations with children and parents were positive.
- Teachers in Norway and Sweden described ethical struggles arising from their desire to safeguard their own health while also living up to their professional responsibilities to children and families<sup>97</sup>.
- A survey from the Swedish Teachers' Association shows that 'Only 22 percent of teachers in preschool completely agree that it is clear which children should be at home according to the Public Health Agency's guidelines, and 2 out of 5 preschool teachers reply that they partially agree or do not at all agree that the rules are clear', and 'Only 3 out of 10 teachers reply that they are allowed to work anywhere when they perform tasks that do not require them to be in the workplace.' (Läraryrbundet 2020). The union sums up the report with: 'The spread of Covid-19 has increased again and the Teachers' Union is now receiving signals that the situation in the country's preschools and schools is unsustainable. The government, authorities and employers are trying to duck responsibility. When far too much responsibility for infection control is placed on the individual teachers, their work environment suffers. This has serious consequences, not only for the teachers' everyday life here and now but also in the longer term with an increased risk of teacher shortages due to stress and sick leave. In other words, the unsustainable current situation will have consequences for children's and students' learning.' This result is interesting because 77% of principals in the corresponding survey carried out in compulsory schools by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate consider that the pandemic has had no or little effect on compulsory schools' ability to fulfil their task (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2020).

<sup>96</sup> [https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/mainnews/fullstory\\_22248\\_en.html](https://www.siptu.ie/media/pressreleases2019/mainnews/fullstory_22248_en.html).

<sup>97</sup> 'The Coronavirus Pandemic and Lessons Learned in Preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States', OMEP Policy Forum - Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid; Wagner, Judith T; Eriksen Ødegaard, Elin. Springer Verlag. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 2020-06-17.

## Training of ECEC staff

**Some countries organised specific training activities to help ECEC staff deal with the new rules and the situation caused by the pandemic. Such training varied from providing education and care in COVID times, to showing how to implement hygiene and safety rules.**

- In October 2020, the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (CPI) held an online training session for pre-primary education teachers on implementing the preschool education curriculum under the COVID-related health and safety measures<sup>98</sup>. In addition, presentations given by academics in paediatrics and paediatric infectious diseases in May, October and November 2020 were made available to the public through the education ministry's website<sup>99</sup>.
- In August 2020, the Slovenian National Education Institute (ZRSŠ) organised three 8-hour webinars, primarily aimed at primary school teachers and head teachers but also open to ECEC staff, on creating a safe and stimulating learning environment even in distance learning. Various other training sessions<sup>100</sup> were also held to support kindergarten and school teachers, head teachers and other education staff in their endeavours to make distance learning work. Other institutions (e.g. the Step by Step Centre at the Pedagogical Institute) offered training courses on the use of digital tools (e.g. Zoom), also for kindergarten staff.

The NESET report underlines that in establishments already working within good ECEC quality frameworks, training courses could more easily be offered on implementing the new safety measures within the ECEC pedagogical vision (i.e. training not just on safety measures but also on how to combine these measures with good pedagogical quality), e.g. the childcare sector in Italy (where pedagogical coordinators at municipal level traditionally work on good quality ECEC)<sup>101</sup>.

**Questions have been raised about the lack of opportunity for ECEC staff to attend high-quality initial training and continuing professional development during the pandemic.**

Some ad hoc solutions had to be found, e.g. for students who needed to complete practical training periods to validate their diploma. In Denmark, for instance, some students had their practical training period replaced by temporary employment. The municipalities set up online job banks to recruit ad hoc staff, and social studies students were encouraged to apply for ad hoc job postings.

The InTrans project noted the importance of investing in ECEC staff training to deal better with crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and to generally keep providing quality education and care<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> <http://enimerosi.moec.gov.cy/archeia/1/ypp11332a>.

<sup>99</sup> [http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020\\_10\\_ekpaidefsi\\_ekpaidefton\\_covid\\_19\\_pana.pdf](http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020_10_ekpaidefsi_ekpaidefton_covid_19_pana.pdf) ; [http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2019\\_parousiasi\\_euc\\_epimorfosi\\_covid19.pdf](http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2019_parousiasi_euc_epimorfosi_covid19.pdf) ; [http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020\\_05\\_20\\_enimerosi\\_covid\\_19\\_pros\\_diefthyntes\\_dimotiki.pdf](http://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/245/2020_05_20_enimerosi_covid_19_pros_diefthyntes_dimotiki.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.zrss.si/novice/seminarji-in-izobrazevanja/>.

<sup>101</sup> Van Laere, K., Sharmahd, N., Lazzari, A., Serapioni, M., Brajčević, S., Engdahl, I., Heimgaertner, H., Lambert, L., Hulpia, H. (2021), 'Governing quality early childhood education and care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic', NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/642131.

<sup>102</sup> [Transitions and professionalization FINAL.pdf \(issa.nl\)](#).

## Impact of lockdown periods on children and families

### Families have struggled

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced disadvantages and increased poverty, so families of children from vulnerable groups have been hardest hit. Since the beginning of the pandemic and in particular during lockdown periods, specific difficulties encountered by families include:

- difficulty in reconciling professional and private lives when teleworking with young children at home
- reduction or loss of income or job
- lack of family support with childcare (e.g. vulnerable grandparents)
- lack of or reduced access to support for children with special needs.

**These challenges potentially affected parent-child relationships as well as children's well-being, development and learning (see following sections).**

Some evidence of these difficulties has been documented:

- In Portugal, an international consortium bringing together scientists from 40 countries is studying the impact of COVID-19 on parental satisfaction and exhaustion all around the world. It shows that confinement at home, social isolation, the closure of day care centres along with kindergartens and schools, teleworking, layoffs and dismissals have all brought new challenges to the job of parenting<sup>103</sup>.
- The German University of Bamberg carried out a survey based on interviews of over 3 000 parents whose children regularly attend a childcare facility. Many parents found it positive to have more time for their children (85%) and their family (80%). But there were also negative effects: parents were often at the end of their tether (66%), found reconciling family and career particularly challenging (85%), and often felt stressed (73%). Nearly all (94%) missed contact with relatives and friends. A further finding was that half of parents wanted day care centres to provide advice on how to support their children. Another study explored how parents coped with the unexpected situation of having to take care of their children during the spring lockdown. It became clear that even in couples where both partners had similar work pressure, it was mostly the mothers who shouldered the childcare burden. A study by the Leibniz Institut für Bildungsverläufe (LifBi 2020) showed that established childcare and work arrangements suddenly stopped working for more than four million working parents from mid-March onwards due to pandemic-related school and day care closures. In all of the families studied, mothers were more likely than fathers to look after their children alone during the pandemic.
- The Slovak association Rodičia.sk conducted a survey of parents in September 2020 on a sample of 1 020 respondents<sup>104</sup>. It showed that closure during quarantine dramatically disrupted the lives of families with children, placing completely new demands on parents' time and energy that risked harming their home-office job performance; parents with children with special educational needs were even more burdened. The association also formulated recommendations for national authorities: closure should be the last resort, the COVID school traffic light system could be helpful and local measures should be preferred to nationwide closure. Parents also commented that special attention should be paid to children with special educational needs, as they suffered most from closure.

<sup>103</sup> <http://noticias.uc.pt/universo-uc/estudo-internacional-avalia-o-impacto-da-covid-19-na-exaustao-parental/>.

<sup>104</sup> <https://ozrodcia.sk/?p=244>.

- A Danish survey of kindergarten leaders<sup>105</sup> showed that the impact of support varied for children in vulnerable positions or children with special needs. 36% of kindergarten leaders considered that the support received by children in vulnerable positions and children with special needs during the period was affected 'positively' or 'very positively'; 40% said that support was not affected; and 24% felt that support had been affected 'negatively' or 'very negatively'. Assessment of support for children in a vulnerable situation also varied: 40% considered that support was not affected, 36% said it has been affected positively and 24% believed it had been affected negatively.
- A German study highlighted that the pandemic was having an even more negative effect on refugee families, according to a case study in the early prevention project 'Strong together!' which supports refugee parents and their young children in Berlin<sup>106</sup>.

### Many national and local governments adopted measures to support families

- In the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, the government decided that some families would receive a temporary reduction of their income-related childcare rate. The reduction was initially limited to 2 months but subsequently extended to 6 months. This 'COVID-19 rate' is a 25% reduction of the current special rate. Eligible families had to show a decrease in family income of at least 10% and a joint family income of less than EUR 44 494.
- In Bulgaria, an amendment to the Regulation for implementation of the Social Assistance Act introduced the right to monthly targeted assistance in the emergency pandemic situation for families with children up to 14 years of age, if one or both working parents – or a single parent – were not able to work remotely from home or could not take paid leave.
- In Croatia, most local authorities agreed not to charge parents kindergarten fees while kindergartens were closed.
- In Cyprus, the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance supported parents of children affected by the pandemic through the economic support package (support programme for coping with the effects of COVID-19)<sup>107</sup>. Cyprus also granted special paid leave, based on salaries, to parents (of children under 15) unable to telework due to ECEC and school closures<sup>108</sup>.
- In Denmark, parents were initially required to pay monthly fees for children in preschool education and care (except for parents entitled to use emergency care), even if preschool closure meant that parents could no longer make use of the service. The government view was that if the closure of institutions was prolonged, circumstances would change and parents would then no longer be required to pay for preschool and care. While the institutions were closed, it was up to the individual municipality to decide whether parents should be compensated. In April 2020, the *Folketing* (parliament) reached an agreement under which municipalities that compensated parents were reimbursed, including for meal services and the provision of public as well as private day care services. The compensation applied to the period from 15 April to 10 May 2020. At the time, several municipalities had already decided on their own initiative to compensate parents. In other municipalities, parents still paid full price even if they were not yet able to send their children back to the institution after the

<sup>105</sup> Mortensen, N. P., Nøhr, K. & Lindeberg, N. H., 2020. *Resultater af spørgeskemaundersøgelse til børnehavedere om erfaringer fra genåbning*, Copenhagen: VIVE.

<sup>106</sup> 'Ghosts in the nursery in exile – Supporting parenting in exile during the COVID-19 pandemic', Schestag 2021, *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, Wiley Online Library.

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.coronavirus.mlsi.gov.cy/>.

<sup>108</sup> 'Commission publishes proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021', Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu).

health authorities allowed them to reopen. However, there were still some institutions that were only partially open and had limited opening hours because they could not initially comply with the guidelines on social distance and regular cleaning (Undervisningsministeriet, 2020a).

- The Danish Government reached agreement with employers and workers groups to introduce a temporary right to unemployment benefits under the Maternity Act for parents compelled by the pandemic to stay at home to look after their children. The scheme covers parents of children who, because of contact with a COVID-positive case at school, are sent home on the recommendation of the health authorities without their necessarily having COVID symptoms; it also covers parents of children diagnosed with the virus. The scheme applies to parents of children up to 13 years of age (Dansk Magisterforening, 2020).
- In Estonia, during the state of emergency which lasted from 12 March to 17 May 2020, most kindergartens remained open – even though the number of children attending kindergartens remained low – so that parents in the frontline professions (doctors, nurses, salespeople, etc.) could continue working. Owners could decide on a case-by-case basis whether to close their kindergarten. Most municipalities exempted parents from paying the kindergarten fee until the end of the state of emergency. In some municipalities, all parents were automatically exempted from the fees, while in others fees were waived only if children did not attend kindergarten during the state of emergency and/or only on the basis of a specific request by the parents.
- In Finland, during the school closure period (18 March to 13 May 2020) it was recommended that parents look after their children at home if possible. During this time the government recommended that ECEC client fees should not be charged if children were not attending ECEC. According to a survey, 70% of municipalities did not collect client fees from these families. A special allowance was introduced for parents who were not able to go to work because they had to take care of their child during the lockdown period. The allowance was EUR 28.94 per day and was available to parents of ECEC-aged children, children in grades 1-3 in basic education, and children with special needs whose parent had to stay at home to take care of them and hence lost wages.
- In France, ECEC establishments agreed not to charge parents fees during the closure and a national aid scheme was introduced. In November 2020, the government announced that all families in difficulty would receive financial aid: the most disadvantaged households would receive a minimum amount of EUR 150 plus an additional EUR 100 per child in the household<sup>109</sup>. The education allowance for children with special needs was automatically extended for 6 months to ease the situation for the families of these children during lockdown and until the start of the 2020 school year.
- In Hungary, national guidelines<sup>110</sup> provided that in the context of the enforced break, nurseries and pre-primary schools had to provide meals for free or at a reduced rate for children of parents who required it. If a non-state institution operating in the locality was unable to provide meals for the children, the municipality was to provide meals and their cost could be claimed afterwards from the central government.

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<sup>109</sup> These households were identified based on their eligibility for one of the following pre-existing governmental financial support schemes: inclusion income support (*Revenu de solidarité active, RSA*), special solidarity allowance (*Allocation de Solidarité Spécifique, ASS*).

<sup>110</sup> Magyar Államkincstár BPM-ÁHI/276-13/2020 ikt.sz.2020. március 23-i emailés körlevele a budapesti főpolgármester és kerületi polgármesterek részére az intézményi, szünidei gyermekétkeztetés, óvodai, bölcsődei támogatás tárgyában (Hungarian State Treasury Circular [No. BPM-ÁHI/276-13/2020] of 23 March 2020 to the Mayor of Budapest and Mayors of Districts regarding the support of child feeding in pre-primary schools and nurseries during break).

- A number of Latvian municipalities decided to provide food support (or financial compensation) to families with children entitled to it<sup>111</sup>.
- During the lockdown period (March-June 2020) the Italian Government adopted a series of measures to support working parents, granting exceptional leave of 30 days for working parents with children under 12 (with 50% of salary) or, alternatively, a babysitting voucher of EUR 1 200 (up to EUR 2 000 for parents working in healthcare); working parents with children aged between 12 and 16 were allowed to be absent from work without salary; work permits to assist family members with disabilities were extended from 3 days per month to 15 days. Almost all municipalities suspended fees for educational services, including transport and canteen fees; in some cases, money paid in advance was returned to the families.
- Lithuania introduced new social security provisions for working parents and carers (mainly women) of elderly or disabled people following the suspension of schools and care establishments, paying 65.9% of declared income in sickness benefit<sup>112</sup>. In May 2021, the Lithuanian parliament approved a proposal<sup>113</sup> to calculate maternity, paternity and childcare benefits based on parental income prior to the COVID-19 outbreak rather than on income in the preceding year. This change in calculations was to apply to both employed and self-employed people<sup>114</sup>.
- In the Netherlands, due to the (partial) closure of childcare centres from 16 March to 7 June 2020, parents received compensation for their own contribution to childcare<sup>115</sup>. Most parents received the reimbursement from the Social Insurance Bank (SVB) on 8 July. If parents were using a municipality-subsidised centre, toddler centre, preschool education or childcare centre for socio-medical reasons, they received a childcare allowance through the childcare organisation or the municipality. The municipalities received extra funds for this from the national government<sup>116</sup>. The amount of reimbursement depended on the parents' income-based contribution for childcare. Parents' personal contribution also usually differs per child, because they receive a different allowance percentage for the first child than for the second and further children<sup>117</sup>. The amount of the reimbursement was about the same as the personal contribution. Reimbursement was based on the statutory maximum hourly rate (EUR 8.17 for day care, EUR 7.02 for out-of-school care and EUR 6.27 for childminder care). Many organisations reimbursed the part above the maximum hourly rate<sup>118</sup>. The reimbursement also depended on other aspects, such as the number of children using childcare, the number of childcare hours and the amount of the aggregate income. As a result, reimbursement could differ slightly from the actual personal contribution

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<sup>111</sup> Aprinkis.lv (news portal) 'Pirmie secinājumi par pandēmijas sekām Pierīgā, Mālpils, Ādaži un Stopiņi' ('The first conclusions about the consequences of the pandemic in Pierīga', Mālpils, Ādaži and Stopiņi) <http://www.aprinkis.lv/index.php/sabiedriba/pasvaldibas/17183-pirmie-secinajumi-par-pandemijas-sekam-pieriga-turpinajums>.

<sup>112</sup> 'Commission publishes proposal for a Joint Employment Report 2021 - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion', European Commission (europa.eu).

<sup>113</sup> <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/ismokos-tevams-kuriu-pajamos-sumazejo-per-pandemija-bus-skaiciuojamos-palankiau>.

<sup>114</sup> 'May 2021 developments in child and family policy in EU member states', Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu).

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/ouders-scholieren-en-studenten-kinderopvang-en-onderwijs/ouders>.

<sup>116</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/ouders-scholieren-en-studenten-kinderopvang-en-onderwijs/ouders>.

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/ouders-scholieren-en-studenten-kinderopvang-en-onderwijs/ouders>.

<sup>118</sup> Idem.



paid<sup>119</sup>. The Ministry of Social Affairs also had information about parents whose income fell sharply due to the COVID-19 crisis or if, for example, they were self-employed and had no income owing to the closures. In those cases, parents received the childcare allowance that matched their current income. In the event of unemployment, the right to childcare allowance continued for up to 3 months after losing work. Parents who lost their job did not have to immediately remove their child(ren) from day care and give up their place. Parents who made use of the new COVID-19 crisis-related temporary emergency bridging measure for employment retained the right to the childcare allowance. After losing their employment, the parents'/caregivers' entitlement to childcare allowance continued for another 3 months. Depending on the number of worked hours they had accumulated, they could be entitled to the allowance for even longer<sup>120</sup>.

- In Poland, during the first wave of the pandemic and the closure of ECEC facilities, an additional allowance (80% of their salary) was paid to parents of children below the age of eight (18 for children with disabilities), as well as to carers of dependent adults who needed to provide care during the lockdown<sup>121</sup>. Around 2% of workers used these allowances in the first quarter of 2020 (Statistics Poland, 2020a).
- In Portugal, in view of the suspension of all face-to-face activities, a special mechanism was created to financially support parents who missed work to stay at home with children up to 12 years old. Parents who had to stay at home with their children owing to the closure of day care centres and family day care centres, the absence of nannies, and the closure of preschool education establishments and leisure centres had their absence justified if they could not resort to teleworking, and they were entitled to exceptional financial support. When day care centres reopened in May 2020, many parents were anxious and most chose to keep their children at home (see Decree-Law No 10-A/2020 of 13 March 2020<sup>122</sup>). Financial support was therefore extended until June 2020. The government considered it useful to continue this support during the transition period so that families could regain confidence in putting their children back into nurseries<sup>123</sup>. The economic and social stabilisation programme (PEES), approved by Council of Ministers Resolution No 41/2020 of 6 June 2020, established a set of measures to address the countless economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>124</sup>. The 'Adapt Social +' programme was created (Ordinance No 178/2020 of 28 July 2020)<sup>125</sup> to provide social responses developed by private social solidarity institutions and legally equivalent entities, as well as by private entities that operate social support activities for the prevention and containment of contagion by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- In Spain, Aldeas Infantiles<sup>126</sup> and UNICEF<sup>127</sup> point out that the socio-economic crisis affects families with children and adolescents more severely. As a response, the

<sup>119</sup> Idem.

<sup>120</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/ouders-scholieren-en-studenten-kinderopvang-en-onderwijs/ouders>.

<sup>121</sup> Zarfenberg, R. (2020a), 'COVID-19 socio-economic responses in Poland' (ESPN Flash Report No. 2020/29)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22625&langId=en>.

<sup>122</sup> <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/130243053>.

<sup>123</sup> <https://eco.sapo.pt/2020/04/29/creches-reabrem-a-18-de-maio-pais-que-fiquem-em-casa-com-os-filhos-mantem-apoio-ate-final-do-mes/>.

<sup>124</sup> <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/135391594>.

<sup>125</sup> <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/138963711>.

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.aldeasinfantiles.es/actualidad/alerta-aumento-del-indice-de-pobreza>.

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.unicef.es/noticia/imv-y-prestacion-por-hijo-cargo-claves-para-reducir-la-pobreza-infantil-en-espana>.

national strategy to combat child poverty<sup>128</sup> includes promoting ECEC for children of 0-3 years of age among its measures. However, the strategy does not set out specific lines of action, a specific budget, targets for children aged 0-3 participating in ECEC, or monitoring and evaluating guidelines.

The European Social Policy Network reports that 21 EU Member States provided **parental support arrangements such as parental leave, with significant differences as regards the payment of such leave**<sup>129</sup>.

**Services which support families and parenting programmes have also been disrupted during the pandemic, in particular during lockdown periods.** The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI) documented how parenting programmes across the world adapted their practices to continue engaging with families<sup>130</sup>.

### Impact on children's health and well-being

**Most surveys and research relating to young children focused on the impact of lockdown on their health, well-being and general situation rather than on their cognitive and educational development. While there is no consensus on the impact, there is little evidence of positive aspects and a lot more to indicate potential negative impacts.**

- In a Danish survey of kindergarten leaders<sup>131</sup>, the majority of respondents considered that children's well-being was positively or very positively affected during the period of closure and reopening, even where children in vulnerable positions or with special needs were concerned. Similarly, a majority of respondents stated that children's social relationships were affected positively or very positively. On the other hand, a spring 2021 study<sup>132</sup> suggests 'a tendency toward adverse consequences on child emotional-behavioral function in relation to the home confinement during the COVID-19 outbreak; the authors however recognise that the results of the study might not be generalizable to other preschool aged children as children in the present study were from better educated families with a better job security than the general Danish population. Also, the results might not be generalizable to children not attending kindergartens, or non-rotating kindergartens'. The authors point to the need to 'increase awareness of child emotional-behavioral function during a lockdown situation' such as in potential future waves of COVID-19.
- Spanish research conducted by Serrano Martinez (2020) highlighted that children under 4 years of age are highly resilient and can adapt easily to new situations. For minors, being with the family means sharing more time and enjoyment with their parents, compared to the pace of life and care routines prior to the lockdown. However, there appear to be two important shortcomings: socialising with other people, and interaction with the environment.

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[https://www.mscbs.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/inclusionSocial/inclusionSocialEspana/Estrategia\\_Prev\\_LuchaPobreza\\_19-23.pdf](https://www.mscbs.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/inclusionSocial/inclusionSocialEspana/Estrategia_Prev_LuchaPobreza_19-23.pdf).

<sup>129</sup> 'Social protection and inclusion policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis', Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu).

<sup>130</sup> 'Supporting the Workforce: Parenting Programs Adapt to COVID-19', EC Workforce (earlychildhoodworkforce.org).

<sup>131</sup> Mortensen, N. P., Nøhr, K. & Lindeberg, N. H., 2020. *Resultater af spørgeskemaundersøgelse til børnehavedere om erfaringer fra genåbning*, Copenhagen: VIVE.

<sup>132</sup> Frontiers | 'Changes in Emotional-Behavioral Functioning Among Pre-school Children Following the Initial Stage Danish COVID-19 Lockdown and Home Confinement' *Psychology* (frontiersin.org).

- This was confirmed by Greek research showing that the effects of absence from the school environment on both cognitive and emotional development were significant and were particularly evident at the beginning of the new school year, in September 2020. Socialisation problems also emerged for children that under normal conditions would have been overcome.
- The Irish *Play and Learning in the Early Years* (PLEY) survey measured play activities at home, the factors that influence play and the impact of some of the restrictions on children aged 1-10. Over 500 parents completed the survey between 21 May and 3 June 2020. Findings showed that the closure of schools, crèches and playgrounds, together with restrictions on physical movement and interactions, had a number of effects on many aspects of children's lives, including on their play, their social relationships and their emotional development. In particular, the findings indicated that children's play was affected by the restrictions (74%). Many children were spending more time on outdoor play than before the restrictions were introduced (78%), and also more time on screens (75%). A third of children in this age group brought information about the virus or restrictions into their play. In addition to the effects the restrictions had on children's play, there were social and emotional effects. Most of the young children concerned missed childcare (67%), their friends (84%) and playing with other children (84%). More worryingly, some parents described their young child's low mood, frustration and behaviour changes as a result of the COVID-19 crisis<sup>133</sup>.
- A German ad hoc survey among 150 paediatricians produced even more worrying findings: during the pandemic paediatricians observed an increase in physical and in particular psychological complaints. School and kindergarten closures and contact restrictions were a particular strain on preschool and school-aged children's psyches: 89% of paediatricians surveyed observed an increase in psychological problems and 37% diagnosed an increase in physical complaints<sup>134</sup>. In France, Benjamin Landman, head of psychiatry at Paris's Robert-Debré paediatric hospital, stated that young children were experiencing developmental regression such as bedwetting, difficulty falling asleep, and separation anxiety<sup>135</sup>. In another German study<sup>136</sup>, data highlighted 'a high frequency of children watching movies or series, with half of preschool-aged children exceeding current recommendations to limit screen time to 30 minutes per day'.
- Similarly, an Italian survey of parents<sup>137</sup> showed a very significant increase in screen time during the lockdown, with 30.8% of 1 to 3-year-olds spending more than 3 hours per day on screens during lockdown, against only 2.3% before. The same survey highlighted many changes in children's sleeping patterns, increased difficulty falling

<sup>133</sup> Egan, S. (2020) 'Lockdown Effects: 'Not the Same Child At All'', 8 July 2020. <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/blog/lockdown-effects-not-the-same-child-at-all/>. Egan, S.M., Pope, J., Moloney, M. *et al.* 'Missing early education and care during the pandemic: the socio-emotional impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young children', *Early Childhood Educ J* 49, 925–934 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01193-2>. 'To school through the screens: the use of screen devices to support young children's education and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic' (tandfonline.com).

<sup>134</sup> Pronova BKK (2020). *Homeschooling und Gesundheit*, 17 August 2020. <https://www.pronovabkk.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/corona-krise-kinder-in-seelischen-noeten.html>

<sup>135</sup> RFI (2020), 'French children traumatised by coronavirus crisis, expert warns', <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20200708-french-children-traumatised-by-coronavirus-crisis-covid-19-lockdown-schoolchildren-mental-health-suicide>

<sup>136</sup> 'Loss of childcare and classroom teaching during the COVID-19-related lockdown in spring 2020: A longitudinal study on consequences on leisure behavior and schoolwork at home' (plos.org).

<sup>137</sup> 'Changes in sleep patterns and disturbances in children and adolescents in Italy during the Covid-19 outbreak' (nih.gov).

asleep, anxiety at bedtime, night waking, nightmares and night terrors, and less napping (the percentage of children aged one to three who did not take naps increased from 7.3% to 20.7%).

- Anecdotal evidence from interviews in Slovakia also showed an increase in obesity and a deterioration in attitudes and habits (as regards early-morning routine, eating, and personal hygiene) of children whose parents did not have the time or ability to care for them properly. Many children, on returning to kindergarten and playing or reporting on their quarantine activities, referred to lack of attention from parents working from home and a lot of time spent in front of screens (TV, smartphones, tablets and PCs). A notable problem was lack of exercise and outside activities, which may have contributed to the increased body weight of some children.
- The Slovenian chamber of clinical psychologists along with other stakeholders published a letter<sup>138</sup> on 30 October 2020 setting out the impact of the pandemic and the effect of the closure of schools and kindergartens on children. It warned that measures passed by the government should not only be based on considerations of health but should also provide conditions that would enable children to spend as much time as possible in kindergartens and schools. If kindergartens cannot provide additional premises that would allow all children to attend kindergarten simultaneously, they should at least allow children to come to kindergarten part of the time. The letter also called on the government to ensure full access to psychological/psychiatric treatment for children who need it.

**The increase in domestic violence and child abuse during lockdown has been well documented in many countries, e.g.:**

- Data in Denmark show that in previous years, municipalities received up to 130 000 calls from schools, day care centres, doctors, police, parents, or anonymous persons with concerns about a child's health or welfare. But during the epidemic, the number of such calls dropped 42%, raising concerns that abuse of children might be happening unnoticed by the municipalities. NGOs consider that institutional closures explain the decrease in calls, as a social educator or a teacher is typically a trusted adult to whom a child can express their problems, but it was not possible for children to turn to them during school closures (DR Nuýheder, 2020).
- Irish assistant professor of developmental psychology Elizabeth Nizon notes that for some children, going to school is their only respite from domestic violence, parental addiction or overcrowded accommodation; as a result, prolonged closure of schools (and childcare) is a nightmare for them. The rise in the volume of calls to Childline (child support service) and the decline in child protection referrals indicates that many, many children are suffering<sup>139</sup>.
- A survey by the German Technische Universität München showed an increase in domestic violence in many families during the spring lockdown: 10.5% of children and 7.5% of women who were in quarantine at home became victims of physical violence.

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<sup>138</sup> Mikuz et al (2020) *Psihosocialne posledice epidemije covid-19 in sspremljajočih ukrepov za otroke, mladostnike in družine, Pismo vladi in drugim institucijam* ('Psychosocial consequences of the covid-19 epidemic and accompanying measures for children, adolescents and families', Letter to the Government and other state institutions).

<sup>139</sup> Nixon, E. (2020) 'School closure might be a dream for some children, but it is a nightmare for others', *Irish Times*, 26 May 2020. URL: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/school-closure-might-be-a-dream-for-some-children-but-it-is-a-nightmare-for-others-1.4252619>.

## **Children with disabilities may have faced increased problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, with insufficient access to support systems.**

For instance, the Regional Administration of Western Finland conducted a broad survey on ECEC conditions during the 2020 spring wave<sup>140</sup>. Significant negative consequences of the pandemic were that support for special-needs children and their families decreased significantly; ECEC staff, management and personnel administration were overburdened; and the municipality's economy was weakened. Similarly, Professor Alf Nicholson notes that various subgroups of disadvantaged children were hit hardest by the pandemic. His concerns include: children with complex care needs who had home-care packages that stalled because of restrictions; families living in direct provision, who always have a very difficult time and who, in view of case clusters, are at greater risk of contracting the virus; children with autism spectrum disorder who attend ABA schools 'and who now are at home and no doubt proving to be a great challenge for their parents'<sup>141</sup>.

## **Learning aspects**

### **How was learning continuity ensured during lockdown periods?**

**Kindergartens have had great difficulty to ensure learning continuity for preschoolers during lockdown periods, for a number of reasons:**

- **Top-level authorities may have given no or little guidance or obligation for kindergartens to provide learning continuity. Many national strategies to ensure education during lockdown did not include preschoolers.**
- **Distance education for preschoolers depends on the availability, motivation and skills of parents, who may not have been able to answer positively to the kindergarten's requests** e.g. for lack of time (as many parents were working from home and struggling to reconcile professional and family lives). In the French-speaking part of Belgium, FAPEO, a parents' association, conducted a study in April 2020<sup>142</sup> entitled 'Confined parents, how do you handle it?', with responses from 4 358 parents from all levels of education. For early childhood education (n = 661) 34.3% of children received homework, with 80.2% of parents having to monitor and support their child. Some parents said that this represented 1 to 2 hours of schoolwork per day. A Portuguese survey conducted in May 2020 by the Universidade Nova de Lisboa on distance learning shows that about 44% of 2 657 preschool educators who took part in the survey did not give preference to distance learning<sup>143</sup>.
- **Vulnerable families may not have had (enough) toys, books or stationery at home to implement the tasks given by kindergarten teachers.**
- **There are a whole range of challenges linked to the use of digital learning** (see dedicated section below).

<sup>140</sup> Kyllönen, M., Liljeström A., Sundell T., Tahvanainen R., Kivikangas M. (2020). Varhaiskasvatus, esi- ja perusopetus poikkeusolojen aikana keväällä 2020 [ECEC during the pandemic in spring]. Opetus- ja kulttuuritoimi 2020 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomen aluehallintoviraston julkaisu.

<sup>141</sup> Wayman, S. (2020) 'How will the Covid-19 era affect our youngest citizens?', *Irish Times* 26 May 2020. URL: <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/how-will-the-covid-19-era-affect-our-youngest-citizens-1.4256418>

<sup>142</sup> FAPEO (2020) Enquête – 'Parents confinés, comment vous gérez ?', ('Confined parents, how do you handle it?'), Brussels.

<sup>143</sup> <https://visao.sapo.pt/atualidade/sociedade/2020-05-25-covid-19-maioria-dos-docentes-da-aulas-por-videoconferencia-e-admite-trabalhar-mais-estudo/>.

Information on the provision of distance learning in ECEC is not available for all countries; in Bulgaria, however, around 70% of kindergartens were providing distance education<sup>144</sup>. In Czechia, it appears that development activities were offered to parents by 75% of nursery schools, usually once a week, but also daily or every few days. Reasons for not doing so related to staff absence (e.g. due to quarantine), lack of interest on the part of parents, technical difficulties in IT use or a lack of IT skills on the part of teachers. A global literature review by the Lego Foundation comments that 'children in early childhood education often did not have contact with teachers, or access to remote early learning during school closure. Evidence is mixed on the nature and extent of caregiver engagement in early learning activities during lockdown'<sup>145</sup>.

**In a number of European countries – although not all – governments implemented initiatives to support distance education for preschoolers, such as general national guidelines for distance education in ECEC, guidance for ECEC staff and guidance for parents. These were not always considered sufficient by ECEC staff.**

### ***National guidelines for distance education in ECEC***

- According to the guidelines of the Finnish Agency for Education (FNAE, 14 May 2020<sup>146</sup>), teaching and learning was intended to continue according to ECEC curricula during the distance teaching, but was organised in alternative ways, including the use of various digital learning environments and solutions and, when necessary, independent learning.
- The Portuguese Ministry of Education established clear rules for kindergartens and day care centres. During the first wave, distance learning was used (especially Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms, but also Skype). Educators tried to establish daily relationships with children and their families, giving them tasks and strategies to develop at home. Digital tools in early childhood were used carefully, with sessions being used depending on children's responses. When children's resistance diminished, educators began to use materials provided by the Ministry of Education, which were made available on the website of the Directorate-General for Education. The most important thing for educators has been to maintain a close relationship with children and families (by phone, by postal service or through school staff).

### ***Guidelines and support to teachers***

- In Denmark, knowledge sharing for teachers on online teaching is facilitated through online platforms<sup>147</sup>.
- In France, teachers were advised to provide parents with activities for their children, especially activities boosting language competences. For instance, they were provided with an online booklet entitled *Support to teaching at home for 3-4 year-old children (Livret d'accompagnement à l'instruction à domicile des enfants de 3 et 4 ans)*<sup>148</sup>.
- In Greece, teachers of closed kindergarten were advised to use the Webex platform for video meetings with children.

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<sup>144</sup> <https://www.monitor.bg/bg/a/view/70-ot-detskite-gradini-na-distancionen-rejim-202269>.

<sup>145</sup> [resource-lego-rapid-review-nurturing-care-covid-19.pdf](https://www.lego.com/en-us/education/lego-education-research/lego-education-research-2020-2021/lego-education-research-2020-2021-1) (fhi360.org).

<sup>146</sup> FNAE, (14.5.2020) Guidelines for primary education. Opetushallitus [The Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE)]. <https://www.oph.fi/fi/koulutus-ja-tutkinnot/opetustoimi-ja-koronavirus>.

<sup>147</sup> E.g. <https://emu.dk/grundskole/dansk/corona-gode-rad-til-undervisning>.

<sup>148</sup> Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a), *Being a Parent in times of Coronavirus (Etre Parent[s] aux temps de Coronavirus)* <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/soutien-parentalite-etre-parents-covid-19.pdf>

- In Italy, the Ministry of Education published pedagogical guidelines to keep distance educational contacts (LEAD – *legami educativi a distanza*) with younger children and their families during the closure of pre-primary schools<sup>149</sup>. The guidelines focused on designing a new relationship to offer children new opportunities for growth. They also sought to: set up learning experiences in a virtual environment; renegotiate relationships and roles with the family as educational partners in planning activities, in cooperating and in balancing children's space of autonomy and parents' intervention; promote children's achievements, even in long-distance relationships; keep direct experience, exploration, discovery and play at the centre of activities that can also be carried out at a distance; talk with children about what was happening, filling the experiences with meaning, giving them hope and trust.
- In Latvia, guidelines on procedures and resources in online education (including ECEC) were prepared by the Skola2030 curriculum project and VISC (the National Centre for Education of the Republic of Latvia) and published by Skola2030 on 28 April 2020. To support children learning at home, preschool teachers were to prepare a weekly plan with recommended tasks, games and activities for parents to use with their child. Teachers were also required to prepare a list of necessary materials to be used at home (links to video materials, pictures, recipes, etc.) Using existing digital platforms (E-Class, ELIIS, Class Dojo), teachers were expected to communicate with parents and to set specific tasks for the children. To establish regular communication with parents and regular mutual feedback, teachers were also recommended to communicate via email and WhatsApp groups. They were requested to establish and communicate an appointment system for parents to call or pick up materials from the preschools, and advise parents on how to organise space and time for study at home. Teachers were invited to make suggestions and comments on preferred activities and on how to use daily routine activities (e.g. meals, laundry, house cleaning) for educational purposes. A list of online resources (TV series, cartoons, educational programmes) for preschool teaching was published by VISC, and a list of guidelines for early childhood education was prepared by Skola2030. The list included webinars, practical advice, examples of lessons, a summary of resources, ideas and suggestions. A separate section was dedicated to parents. During the second lockdown, methodological support to preschool teachers was still provided by Skola2030, in the form of webinars, online consultations, participation in teachers learning community<sup>150</sup>, etc.
- In Lithuania, the National Education Agency under the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport created an internet platform<sup>151</sup> with information on distance teaching. It also organised a project entitled *Let's Get to Know Childhood* with Vilnius College of Technology and Design; examples of practical activities filmed during the project served as illustrations that help to achieve the competences agreed in the preschool and preschool education programmes (cognitive, artistic, health, social and communication)<sup>152</sup>. Distance training for teachers was also organised.
- The Portuguese Ministry of Education provided resources for teachers to continue the learning and teaching processes in preschool education and primary and secondary education<sup>153</sup>. These resources include activity suggestions, tools, videos, distance learning methodologies, FAQs, etc. Preschool teachers can find an example of how to organise children's routines at home with pedagogical guidelines and activity

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.istruzione.it/sistema-integrato-06/orientamenti.html>

<sup>150</sup> Skola 2030 (2020), *Aicinām pirmsskolu un skolu skolotājus un izglītības iestāžu vadītājus pievienoties skolotāju mācīšanās kopienai* (Pre-school and school teachers as well as heads of educational institutions are invited to join the teacher learning community) <https://www.skola2030.lv/lv/jaunumi/3/skola2030-aktualitates-novembri>.

<sup>151</sup> E-mokykla (E-school) virtual teaching portal: [www.nsa.smm.lt/nuotolinis](http://www.nsa.smm.lt/nuotolinis).

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLb3M6Z90Z4rRuU-RcgtNjHTe9Rk2OQELV>.

<sup>153</sup> <https://apoioescolas.dge.mec.pt/>.

suggestions for parents to continue preschool education at home, according to their family contexts.

- In Romania, the website [digital.educared.ro](http://digital.educared.ro) proposed specific methodological guidelines, applications and digital resources for teachers of all education levels, including early education. Webinars were organised at national level for teachers in preschool education, focused on adapting learning activities to online learning and promoting alternative distance learning activities in communities with a poor internet connection or for families with no access to digital devices. Methodological guidelines were published online for kindergarten teachers to address learning gaps and socio-emotional aspects caused by the school closure.

### **Guidelines to parents**

- In Lithuania, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport issued recommendations for teachers and parents of pre-primary and preschool children education at home<sup>154</sup>.
- In Romania, a dedicated phone line (TelVerde) for parents and kids was set up.
- In Luxembourg, online platforms with a variety of learning material were provided:
  - [www.schouldoheem.lu](http://www.schouldoheem.lu) offers a wide range of educational material for many areas. It is aimed at parents but can also be used by educators and teachers in the ECEC sector.
  - <https://kannerdoheem.lu/> offers many ideas for activities for families with children aged 1 to 4 years, aiming to activate young children's creative thinking.
  - At [www.aktivdoheem.lu](http://www.aktivdoheem.lu), parents and children find advice on how to stay or become physically active.
  - The website [www.enfancejeunesse.lu/de/coronavirus](http://www.enfancejeunesse.lu/de/coronavirus) offers multiple ideas for parents on activities with their children.
- In France, a range of tools were developed:
  - Dedicated digital resources were made available for parents of children with special needs via websites such as Cap Inclusive School, developed by *Réseau Canopé*<sup>155</sup>.
  - The Health Ministry launched an exceptional fund of EUR 500 000 to support national associations and heads of associative networks working with parents facing difficulties related to the lockdown and the COVID-19 epidemic. The scheme allocates funds to organisations in order to equip parents with the digital competences and pedagogical knowledge for the development of children. The actions to be supported by the fund focus generally on providing distance support via phone calls, video calls, emails and so on, with specific focus on preventing children's overexposure to screens.
  - A webpage was created to guide parents in navigating and managing digital tools for children's education and development<sup>156</sup>. A systematic focus was put on parents in difficulty with digital tools, as well as on *allophone* parents (person speaking a language other than the majority of the population of the country they live in, in this case French) or illiterate parents (see Part 2.1).

### **Other measures**

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<sup>154</sup> *Ikimokyklinis.lt*, (pre-school.lt), portal (19 March 2020).

<https://www.ikimokyklinis.lt/index.php/naujienos/bendros-naujienos/ikimokyklinis-ir-priesmokyklinis-ugdymas-nuotoliniu-budu-patarimai-mokytojams-ir-tevams/26707>

<sup>155</sup> Public institution of the French Ministry of Education, publishing, editing, producing and disseminating educational and administrative resources for professional education.

<sup>156</sup> Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, Being a parent during the pandemic <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/grands-dossiers/etre-parent-s-en-periode-d-epidemie-de-coronavirus/>.



- Many ministries in charge of ECEC worked with television channels to offer educational programmes for young children (e.g. Cyprus, Belgium (the French-speaking part)<sup>157</sup>, France<sup>158</sup>, Italy<sup>159</sup>, Lithuania<sup>160</sup>, Portugal<sup>161</sup>, Slovenia<sup>162</sup>), or created dedicated websites (e.g. Estonia<sup>163</sup>, France<sup>164</sup>).
- In April 2020, students at the University of Luxembourg produced learning videos for Mathematics, German and French for the ECEC sector. These are now available on an online platform (not publicly available) for educators in ECEC institutions.
- In Slovenia, the Cultural Bazaar<sup>165</sup> platform presents a selection of quality online learning culture and art materials prepared by various cultural institutions from all over Slovenia. The platform is intended for children, pupils and students, professionals in kindergarten and schools, and other adults who care for children and young people. Another national initiative is the SKUM<sup>166</sup> project, co-financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, which prepared many art and cultural online activities for preschool children and their teachers.
- A few countries, such as Cyprus, also produced educational material on COVID-19 for young children<sup>167</sup>.

**In many countries, in particular where there was no national strategy, guidance or initiative to support learning in ECEC, ad hoc solutions were found by kindergarten teachers themselves, who decided of their own free will to liaise with parents by phone or through social media and undertake some activities to support learning at home.** These included:

- sharing parenting recommendations
- recommending educational games to play at home/outdoors
- lending toys, books and material from the school
- distributing learning tasks
- organising video calls with (groups of) children to speak or sing together
- informing parents about performance standards for children due to start primary school (this initiative was organised in Slovakia).

The German University of Bamberg<sup>168</sup> looked into ECEC educators' perceptions of the work situation during the closure. Nearly 80% of parents had contact with their kindergarten and considered this predominantly positive. Similarly, more than 80% of educators also stated that they had made contact with the parents. But they also declared they needed

<sup>157</sup> OUFtivi (rtbf.be).

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.lumni.fr/primaire/maternelle>.

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.raisplay.it/bambini/>.

<sup>160</sup> MESS, Press release, (3 April, 2020)

[https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/pranesimai\\_spaudai/naujienos\\_1/lrt-televizijos-eterijepamokeles-ikimokyklinukams-priesmokyklinukams-ir-pradinukams-](https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/pranesimai_spaudai/naujienos_1/lrt-televizijos-eterijepamokeles-ikimokyklinukams-priesmokyklinukams-ir-pradinukams-)

<sup>161</sup> #EstudoEmCasa (mec.pt).

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.rtvsl.si/tv/otroski/izodrom/o-projektu/519052>.

<sup>163</sup> <https://lasteekraan.err.ee/>.

<sup>164</sup> <https://monenfant.fr/des-loisirs-pour-vos-enfants-pendant-les-vacances-scolaires>.

<sup>165</sup> <https://kulturnibazar.si/kuv-na-daljavo/>.

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.skum.si/en>.

<sup>167</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtHpEF38D2g&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtHpEF38D2g&feature=emb_logo);

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DsrDrcDpFw&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DsrDrcDpFw&feature=emb_logo).

<sup>168</sup> Universität Bamberg (2020). Familien & Kitas in der Corona-Zeit. August 2020 <https://www.uni-bamberg.de/fbe/forschung/laufend/situation-von-fruehpaedagogischen-fachkraefte-und-familien-mit-kita-kindern-in-der-corona-zeit/>.

comprehensive professional support at this point, as this was also a new field of work for them, in a special situation.

ECEC staff working with the youngest children had to be particularly creative to keep providing care and education during the pandemic and in particular during lockdown periods; the EDUCAS project documented how staff in Belgium, Italy and Lithuania managed to work with families<sup>169</sup>.

**Such approaches are very positive for children, who were able to benefit from them. However, such approaches were uncommon and not always very efficient,** as illustrated by these findings:

- Preliminary results from a Maltese research study carried out by the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education at the Faculty of Education show that the responsibility for providing remote learning experiences shifted to teachers, who were not given specific guidelines and guidance to follow. This meant that while teachers had the liberty to choose the best possible approaches to use, they were not prepared and had very little support provided at this level. As a result, most early years educators reported that they tended mainly to forward links to songs, activities, etc. to parents, and that few of them provided live sessions for children of such a young age.
- A comparative study shows that 42.1% of Italian kindergarten children were not involved in any educational activity during the lockdown period in spring 2020, while this was the case only for 3.6% French children<sup>170</sup>.
- In some countries (e.g. Slovakia), it was also noted that only private ECEC settings made such efforts as they were dependent on parental fees.

**This lack of national strategies or guidance also means that many children were left out because of:**

- **their age (too young – the educational aspect of ECEC for children under 3 was hardly ever considered); or**
- **the families' socio-economic circumstances (e.g. lack of digital equipment) – see below.**

### **The specific challenge of using new technologies in ECEC**

**As with primary and secondary education, online learning was an important option to support preschoolers' learning; however, many national strategies and policy discussions did not include the ECEC sector. Specific difficulties appear for this sector for online teaching and learning:**

- **ECEC settings and teachers may not have had enough/relevant digital equipment<sup>171,172</sup> to ensure a digital liaison between kindergartens and families.**

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<sup>169</sup> The EDUCAS Project Focuses on Educare Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic | ISSA.

<sup>170</sup> Champeaux, Hugues & Mangiavacchi, Lucia & Marchetta, Francesca & Piccoli, Luca, 2020 'Learning at Home: Distance Learning Solutions and Child Development during the COVID-19 Lockdown,' IZA Discussion Papers 13819, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).

<sup>171</sup> E.g. the Lithuanian Minister of Education acknowledged that kindergartens were the institutions worst equipped with IT technologies. Mess, Press release (6 May, 2020): [https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/pranesimai\\_spaudai/ministras-a-monkevicius-rengiames-visuotiniam-vaiku-sugrizimui-i-darzelius](https://www.smm.lt/web/lt/pranesimai_spaudai/ministras-a-monkevicius-rengiames-visuotiniam-vaiku-sugrizimui-i-darzelius).

<sup>172</sup> In a study by the Czech School Inspectorate, 24% of nursery schools stated that current IT equipment presented a fundamental problem for online education. Often the main difficulty was a lack of good PCs and laptops (almost 80%), and the absence or low quality

- **ECEC staff may not have had access to protected online material**<sup>173</sup>.
- **Lack of digital skills among ECEC staff.**
- **Many families do not have adequate IT equipment to facilitate online learning by their pre-schoolers;** when such equipment is available in the family, older children or teleworking parents may be given priority to use it. Families living in very remote areas may not have access to high-quality broadband, while families living in very vulnerable situations such as refugee camps may not have access at all to any IT equipment.
- There are a lot of debates on the **impact of screens and possible overexposure to screens** of young children; for instance, the French Ministry of Health and the Higher Audio-visual Council point to the long-term consequences of overexposure to screens, which could hinder the development of children under the age of 3 by imposing on them a passive interaction with their environment, which would have negative impacts especially in terms of language and motor skills<sup>174</sup>.
- **Young children may not be interested in online educational activities and interactions with peers and ECEC professionals; some may be uncomfortable interacting with their teachers through a screen.**
- **Some parents may be uncomfortable with images of their homes and family members being visible during online activities. They might also worry that children may inadvertently encounter inappropriate material or come into contact with predators online**<sup>175</sup>.

### Impact on learning by young children

Analysis of the impact of lockdown periods on children of primary and secondary age education is now well developed. **In many European countries, it appears that there is as yet no systematic assessment of the impact of ECEC closure on the development of competences in young children (language, cognitive or physical development), or of the impact on psychological development and well-being. Specific information or analysis of the lockdown's impact on children in their early years are still scarce.** There may be a number of reasons for this:

- the crisis is still recent and ongoing in many countries, and it is difficult to evaluate the mid-term or long-term impact of lockdown periods;
- in a number of countries, no survey, study, research or evaluation in the ECEC sector has taken place, possibly because priority for such work was given to compulsory education (usually starting with primary school);
- policy attention was focused on managing the crisis on a day-to-day basis.

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of the internet connection. Approximately 7% of nursery schools felt that unsatisfactory IT skills on the part of teachers was a problem.

<sup>173</sup> E.g. in Croatia, kindergartens did not have digital credentials to access much useful online content provided by the Ministry of Education and CARNET, the national research and education network. Such content included education courses, platforms and materials. Smolanji Tokić, I., Vukašinović, A. (2020), 'Continuity of educational process through virtual Kindergarten during covid-19 outbreak – case study from Croatia', COVID-19 - implikacije na odgoj i obrazovanje u Republici Hrvatskoj Zagreb: Hrvatsko pedagogijsko društvo, 2020. str. 1-3 (plenarno, prošireni sažetak, znanstveni).

<sup>174</sup> CSA (2020), Children and screens (*Les enfants et les écrans : les conseils du CSA*) <https://www.csa.fr/Proteger/Protection-de-la-jeunesse-et-des-mineurs/Les-enfants-et-les-ecrans-les-conseils-du-CSA>.

<sup>175</sup> The Coronavirus Pandemic and Lessons Learned in Preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States: OMEP Policy Forum - Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid; Wagner, Judith T; Eriksen Ødegaard, Elin. Springer Verlag. International journal of early childhood, 2020-06-17.

**The following findings can, however, be noted:**

- In France, children starting primary school in September 2020 have been evaluated in French and Mathematics; comparison with similar tests performed in 2019 showed a drop in performance<sup>176</sup>.
- A comparative study suggests that younger kids (aged 3-6) suffered more from the lockdown, both in terms of learning achievement and emotional status, in particular in Italy, where 40% of them did not receive any type of distance learning support from their teachers<sup>177</sup>. The study also suggests that 'the lockdown had a stronger negative effect on boys, on kids attending kindergarten (in Italy) or secondary school (in France), and on children whose parents have a lower education level'.
- A Polish survey of kindergarten teachers by (Jaskulska, Jankowiak, & Rybińska, 2020) assessed the impact of the distance learning on children. In the opinion of teachers, distance learning allows for successful implementation of activities supporting children's cognitive development, but is much more difficult for activities supporting social development. More than half of the respondents consider progress in social development practically impossible.
- In Slovakia, experts observed that children using only the Roma language in family communication often lost the opportunity to improve their knowledge of the language of instruction (Slovak or Hungarian) during the quarantine.
- A British study noted that 'there is growing evidence that the past year of lockdowns has had an impact on young children's language skills. Data from 50 000 pupils and a survey of schools across England have shown an increased number of four- and five-year-olds needing help with language. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) research suggests the measures taken to combat the pandemic have deprived the youngest children of social contact and experiences essential for increasing vocabulary. Less or no contact with grandparents, social distancing, no play dates, and the wearing of face coverings in public have left children less exposed to conversations and everyday experiences'<sup>178</sup>. Another British study shows that children from a disadvantaged background 'who continued to attend ECEC showed enhanced language benefits. This suggests that children from less affluent backgrounds who lost access were disproportionately disadvantaged by the social distancing measures'<sup>179</sup>.

**Very little is known on measures adopted by ECEC institutions, and by local and national government to help children catch up on a potential loss of learning.**

The following Dutch initiative is worth noting: in June 2020, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social Affairs, launched the subsidy scheme *Subsidieregeling inhaal- en ondersteuningsprogramma aanvullend op voorschoolse educatie 2020* (subsidy scheme catch-up and support programme in addition to preschool education 2020). This subsidy was intended to provide financial support for catch-up and support programmes in addition to preschool education. This was to provide toddlers with a referral<sup>180</sup> (called an *indicatie* in Dutch) for preschool education (who have,

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<sup>176</sup> Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de la jeunesse et des sports, Evaluations 2020 – Repères CP, CE1: premiers résultats. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/evaluations-2020-reperes-cp-ce1-premiers-resultats-307122>.

<sup>177</sup> *Learning at Home: Distance Learning Solutions and Child Development during the COVID-19 Lockdown*, Hugues Champeaux, Lucia Mangiavacchi, Francesca Marchetta, Luca Picoli, IZA Institute of Labour Economics, Discussion Paper Series IZA DP No. 13819, October 2020.

<sup>178</sup> *Lockdowns hurt child speech and language skills - report - BBC News*, 27 April 2021.

<sup>179</sup> *Early childhood education and care (ECEC) during COVID-19 boosts growth in language and executive function - Davies - - Infant and Child Development - Wiley Online Library*.

<sup>180</sup> Municipalities determine which children are eligible. They then give a child a preschool *indicatie*, or referral. Because the criteria are different in every municipality, an early

for example, a language deficit) due to backlogs caused by the closure of child centres due to COVID-19<sup>181</sup>.

The subsidy scheme was developed for last summer (2020) as a remedial measure after the almost three-month-long COVID-19 closure in the spring. In order to catch up with preschool programmes, the subsidy gave preschool education (Dutch: *voorschool educatie* – ‘VE’) providers the opportunity to carry out activities during the school holidays for children with a preschool referral. As preschool education for toddlers at risk of educational disadvantage stopped on 15 March 2020, this increased the risk of them falling further behind. Accordingly, the subsidy providing this extra developmental stimulation during the school holidays was designed to prevent this from happening<sup>182</sup>. Many of the toddlers concerned do not normally receive preschool education during holiday periods because the provider (normally) only offers preschool education during the school term.

The Ministry granted the subsidy to childcare centre operators to organise a catch-up and support programme at preschool-providing institutions from 4 July 2020 to 3 January 2021 for at least five preschoolers per institution<sup>183</sup>. The total subsidy amount of EUR 7 million is intended to fund programmes in which young children participate for 2-5 weeks and for 10-16 hours per week. The programme must fall within the broad educational support package and be offered in the summer, autumn or Christmas holidays of 2020.

Applicants are eligible for a subsidy of EUR 12 per infant per hour and a fixed amount of EUR 500 for coordination. If the subsidy ceiling of EUR 7 million had been exhausted, the subsidy would have been divided proportionally (no less than 90% of the application amount per provider). If the EUR 7 million still had not been sufficient, the intention was to choose among the applying projects<sup>184</sup>. From 15 June to 28 June 2020, child centre operators could apply for a grant to organise these catch-up and support programmes for preschool education<sup>185</sup>. Grant applicants received the formal decision no later than 8 weeks after 28 June, and the subsidies granted were paid no later than September 2020<sup>186</sup>. No subsidy is awarded for activities for which the institution already receives funding from the government or a municipality<sup>187</sup>.

Nearly 3 700 toddlers have made use of the scheme. However, according to a letter from the sectoral representative organisations for preschool education, childcare and social childcare respectively (BMK, BK and SWN), the subsidy was underutilised. Just under EUR 2 million has been requested from the available budget of EUR 7 million<sup>188</sup>. According to the sectoral representatives, that was partly due to the timing of the application period, just after the reopening and just before the summer holidays. Organisations had too little time to check with parents whether there was enthusiasm for additional preschool

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childhood education referral can differ from place to place. Municipalities receive money from the national government to support children at risk of being disadvantaged.

<sup>181</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/financiering-onderwijs/extra-geld-onderwijs-door-coronacrisis/veelgestelde-vragen-subsidieregeling-inhaal--en-ondersteuningsprogramma%E2%80%99s-voorschoolse-educatie>.

<sup>182</sup> Idem.

<sup>183</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2020-29729.html>.

<sup>184</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2020-29729.html>.

<sup>185</sup> Holders of childcare centres can only submit the application for childcare centres that are registered with a preschool offer in the *Landelijk Register Kinderopvang* (National Register for Childcare Centres, LRK) and that provide preschool education to toddlers with an *indication*. Child centres that are not registered with a preschool offer in the national register are not eligible.

<sup>186</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/financiering-onderwijs/extra-geld-onderwijs-door-coronacrisis/veelgestelde-vragen-subsidieregeling-inhaal--en-ondersteuningsprogramma%E2%80%99s-voorschoolse-educatie>.

<sup>187</sup> <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stcrt-2020-29729.html>.

<sup>188</sup> <https://www.ocalekinderopvang.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Verzoek-tweede-aanvraagtermijn-subsidieregeling-aanvullende-VE-programmas-BK-BMK-SWN.pdf>.

programmes. However, where the additional preschool education programmes could be carried out, the response was positive. Parents were happy with the offer, children had a good time and pedagogical staff saw the positive effects. Organisations therefore indicated that they would like there to be a second application period if they were unable to apply for the subsidy in the first application period due to practical obstacles<sup>189</sup>.

In September 2020, the sectoral representatives (BMK, BK and SWN) asked the Ministry of Education to set a second application period for the subsidy scheme, to extend it up to and including the summer holidays of 2021, and to cancel the requirement for a minimum of five toddlers to participate<sup>190</sup>.

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<sup>189</sup> Idem.

<sup>190</sup> <https://www.kinderopvangtotaal.nl/bmk-bk-en-swn-willen-tweede-termijn-subsidie-aanvullende-ve-programmas/>.

## Providing high-quality early childhood education and care in times of pandemic (outside of lockdown periods)

**During the first wave of COVID-19, most European countries closed ECEC settings. Following the first wave, most settings reopened and have broadly remained open – even when lockdown periods were reinstated – to support parents’ employment and children’s education, care and well-being. However, conditions have been (very) different from what they were in normal time. This has raised a number of questions, and concerns have been expressed as to how to provide nurturing care and education to children during the pandemic.**

Some of these questions and concerns are identified below:

- Do all children have equal access to ECEC provision? How can we make sure that this does not reinforce social inequity?
- What is the best way to provide efficient learning in times of pandemic? Which pedagogies can be used? Is the lack of free play or the reduced number of toys and material a problem?
- How can nurturing care be provided, in a context where physical distancing prevails (with children and with families)?
- How can ECEC staff support children’s well-being? How can they help them catch up on any possible learning or development loss?
- What is the impact of physical distancing for children (between them, and between them and the ECEC staff?)
- When ECEC staff need to wear a mask at all times, does it have an impact on children, e.g. on their language and emotional development?
- How can ECEC institutions and staff be supported? What kind of measures, guidance, material do they need?

**Very few responses can be given to the answers above, due to a lack of (comparable) data and research.** However, some initiatives and first studies can be mentioned, and these offer a way to start exploring possible answers to these questions:

### Learning and pedagogies

- It was observed that in some independent schools in Malta, the provision of schooling was one week remote and one week face-to-face. Even with the reopening of schools, the pace of learning has slowed down.

### Guidelines to ECEC institutions and staff

- In September 2020, UNICEF published detailed guidelines to reopen early childhood education settings<sup>191</sup>, highlighting that ‘reopening ECE settings can provide children with much-needed emotional support, learning opportunities and offers reliable childcare options for parents returning to work’.
- In May 2020, the Croatian Ministry of Education issued short ‘Recommendations to work with preschool children in ECEC facilities’<sup>192</sup> mainly referring to different aspects of the work, such as bringing children to facilities, recommendations for pedagogical work with children, recommendations for distance learning, etc. Each ECEC institution was free to organise the learning and pedagogical process in their own manner. In

<sup>191</sup> [Global-guidance-on-reopening-early-childhood-education-settings.pdf \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/earlychild/global-guidance-on-reopening-early-childhood-education-settings.pdf).

<sup>192</sup> <https://mzo.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/dokumenti/Obrazovanje/KoronaInfo/Preporuka%20za%20rad%20s%20djecom%20rane%20i%20pred%C5%A1kolske%20dobi.pdf>.

August, the Ministry opened a call centre<sup>193</sup> supporting all educational institutions, giving feedback and answers to their possible questions and issues regarding the reopening and functioning of the educational institutions during the pandemic.

- A Danish survey of kindergarten leaders<sup>194</sup> shows that the common pedagogical basis and the individual curriculum themes have been unchanged, or there was increased focus on the themes in the kindergarten in the period after closures. There has been greater focus on special support for children's play communities and the dynamics of those communities, as well as on the quality of outdoor life.
- In Luxembourg, the government set up a system of rotation: each school class was divided into two groups, one taught at school, while the other stayed at home, supplementing their learning using learning videos. The groups alternated at weekly intervals<sup>195</sup>. The division of classes was intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in ECEC institutions, schools and school buses. The rotation system would allow the two-metre safety distance to be respected in C1 (children aged 3-5) classrooms.
- The Portuguese Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security prepared a support document for the reopening of kindergartens, in line with the guidelines issued by the Directorate-General for Health and the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education<sup>196</sup>. This document sets out guidelines for reorganising the management of kindergartens and aims to support, in pedagogical terms, institutions, staff and families, while ensuring overall protection. These guidelines also include specifications regarding management and use of individual protection equipment, scheduling of appointments and physical distance, in addition to overall measures on the easing of lockdown.
- The Slovenian Ministry of Education also published hygiene recommendations for kindergartens<sup>197</sup>.

### Well-being and relationships

- In November 2020, the Greek Ministry of Education published a decision on the recruitment of psychologists<sup>198</sup>, recognising the need for the presence and contribution of child psychologists and therapists in public kindergartens to help young children deal with issues such as fear of illness, insecurity, lockdown of social contacts, continued use of mask and other possible needs.
- In a Danish survey<sup>199</sup>, kindergarten leaders reported reductions and postponements of parent interviews and parent meetings (89%) and of the planning and evaluation of work with pedagogical curricula (77%). In contrast, language assessments and collaboration with social workers were postponed or reduced to a lesser extent,

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<sup>193</sup> <https://mzo.gov.hr/vijesti/ministarstvo-znanosti-i-obrazovanja-otvara-pozivni-centar-i-jedinstvenu-e-mail-adresu-idemouskolu-mzo-hr/3910>.

<sup>194</sup> Mortensen, N. P., Nøhr, K. & Lindeberg, N. H., 2020. *Resultater af spørgeskemaundersøgelse til børnehavedere om erfaringer fra genåbning*, Copenhagen: VIVE.

<sup>195</sup> 'Retour en classe en alternance' (Senzig, 2020).

<sup>196</sup>

[https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/orientacoes\\_para\\_a\\_reabertura\\_da\\_educacao\\_pre-escolar.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/orientacoes_para_a_reabertura_da_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf).

<sup>197</sup> [higienska\\_priporocila\\_za\\_vrtce\\_za\\_preprecevanje\\_sirjenja\\_sars-cov-2\\_priporocila\\_za\\_obdobje\\_ko\\_se\\_v\\_drzavi\\_pojavljajo\\_posamicni\\_primeri\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.nijz.si/files/higienska_priporocila_za_vrtce_za_preprecevanje_sirjenja_sars-cov-2_priporocila_za_obdobje_ko_se_v_drzavi_pojavljajo_posamicni_primeri_covid-19.pdf) (nijz.si).

<sup>198</sup> [https://www.esos.gr/sites/default/files/articles-legacy/psychologoi\\_2.pdf](https://www.esos.gr/sites/default/files/articles-legacy/psychologoi_2.pdf).

<sup>199</sup> Mortensen, N. P., Nøhr, K. & Lindeberg, N. H., 2020. *Resultater af spørgeskemaundersøgelse til børnehavedere om erfaringer fra genåbning*, Copenhagen: VIVE.



although 55% and 52% respectively indicated that these activities have been reduced or postponed.

- The 'play-pod' model has been adopted in Ireland. This model restricts interactions between closed groups of children and adults as an alternative to social distancing, which is considered not possible with young children. The purpose of 'play-pods' is to limit the number of people a child has contact with, to facilitate tracing, and to support close, positive interactions between children and their adult caregivers, like in a key-worker system (under which each member of staff has several children as their particular charge and concern). It is a definition that recognises and accepts that it is not in children's best interest to place physical distancing expectations on them in ECEC settings. The 'play-pod' model aims to be child-centric, therefore there are lots of practical elements to consider. The implementation of a 'play-pod' model needs to be considered by each setting and guidelines have been provided<sup>200</sup>. This model is likely to have minimised the psychological impact of the changed ECEC environment on children in Ireland. Commentators have noted that the play-pod model will hopefully fulfil the aim of supporting 'close, positive interactions between children and their adult caregivers'.
- In August 2020, the Italian Ministry of Education adopted a guidance document<sup>201</sup> for the reopening of ECEC settings, underlining the need to reconcile health and safety rules with the need to safeguard the specific features and quality of children's educational processes, while providing training and pedagogical support for children and staff. Prevention and containment were considered through organisational solutions such as the stability and continuity of groups/sections and the exclusive use of spaces (where possible), additional staff, health surveillance methods, and the establishment of committees to monitor how the measures were applied. In every educational service and preschool, time and space had to be provided for reception and integration of new enrolled children, accompanied by a parent or other delegated adult.
- The Portuguese Government set up specific conditions for ECEC provision, including limits on the numbers of pupils per class, the use of personal protective equipment, physical distance<sup>202</sup>, etc. In this phase, the Association of Childhood Education Professionals advocated dialogue and guaranteeing the rights of children as social actors, endowed with reflective and critical thinking, and considering children's voices in the daily life of the kindergarten. In this context, it was stressed that children must understand and participate in the construction of the 'new' rules of hygiene, respiratory and physical distance as an integral part of their routines. Also, it was a challenge to ensure that children take care of themselves and other children, fulfilling and collaborating with colleagues in compliance with these 'new' rules, while making themselves heard about their fears, doubts, expectations and proposals. Moreover, although attendance at preschool education is not mandatory, it was considered important to ensure that children could be physically present with their educators and peers. There was some anxiety among parents, but ECEC professionals managed to allay their fears. Thanks to meetings and systematic feedback to families about the new rules, it was possible to reopen ECEC facilities without major problems. As a result, ECEC professionals were successful in their joint effort with parents to create an environment of emotional security for children and to minimise any resistance due to them having been away for so long. The role of parents was very important, in particular the National Confederation of Parents' Associations (CONFAP), which worked with schools, parents, municipalities and the Directorate-General for School Establishments.

<sup>200</sup> Milica Atanackovic (2020) 'Pod Talk', 3 June 2020

<https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/blog/pod-talk/>.

<sup>201</sup> 95304f45-f961-bffc-5c6a-8eed6b60fc92 (miur.gov.it).

<sup>202</sup> <https://www.dge.mec.pt/noticias/orientacoes-reabertura-da-educacao-pre-escolar>.

- The Erasmus+ EDUCAS project, which focuses on creating supportive environments for children to develop in a holistic way, collected observations on how families and ECEC staff had to adapt during the pandemic, in particular during the transition moments<sup>203</sup>.

### Use of masks by ECEC staff and/or children

Since the beginning of the pandemic, rules on wearing a mask have varied considerably across Europe, depending on the pandemic's evolution and the extent of knowledge about COVID-19. It seems that in most countries, children under 6 did not have to wear a mask to attend ECEC, although staff had to wear them, at least when interacting with colleagues and families. **Wearing a mask when interacting with children appeared to be the most contentious issue, raising questions on the impact this could have on children, e.g. on their language and emotional development. There were particular concerns on the impact it could have on children with special needs or children whose mother tongue is different from the language used in the ECEC institution.** Some countries, such as Italy, recommended that teachers and nurses wear transparent visors in order to remain recognisable to pupils<sup>204</sup>, and France organised the distribution of such masks<sup>205</sup>.

**Many observations have been made and many opinions expressed by ECEC and medical professionals; however, as the pandemic is still unfolding, there is no consensus within the scientific community regarding the masks' impact on young children,** as illustrated below.

In December 2020, French researchers surveyed close to 600 ECEC professionals working in crèches (ECEC settings for children aged 0 to 3) to gather information on the impact of masks on children based on the staff's observations<sup>206</sup>:

- The first conclusions of the survey relate to the impact of masks on language development (understanding, producing and listening to a language). Interactions are of a poorer quality with the mask on; wearing a mask may have a negative impact on children as they rely on watching the adults' mouths and faces to produce language through imitation. Without visual support, children have more difficulties understanding the ECEC staff's instructions or identifying the person who is talking to them. Without the masks, the children's attention improves significantly.
- The second set of conclusions is about children's adaptability. Children are adaptable; overall, wearing the mask has not drastically impacted their emotional and social reactions. However, children seem to show more signs of worry or to cry more easily when adults are masked. Children can encounter difficulties in recognising adults with the mask on and they often try to take the masks off the adult's face. Some children seem to be smiling less when ECEC staff wears masks. Around a third of children do not react to ECEC staff's smiles under their masks, whereas some ECEC practitioners mentioned that children recognise smiles under the mask and can smile back. When the ECEC staff takes off their masks, 80% of children start smiling.
- The third list of conclusions is about masks' impact on ECEC practice. ECEC staff report finding it physically uncomfortable to wear masks all day. Masks prevent them from properly carrying out some of their regular activities, such as singing, running, or reading to children. Therefore, ECEC practitioners may have to speak louder or modulate their voices to convey emotions better. Communication can become more

<sup>203</sup> [Do Families Feel "In"... Even When Having to Stay "out"? | ISSA](#)

<sup>204</sup> Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento Protezione Civile – Comitato tecnico-scientifico – verbale n.82 del 28/5/2020).

<sup>205</sup> [Épidémie de Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) -Petite enfance : des masques transparents pour les crèches et les maisons d'assistants maternels | service-public.fr.](#)

<sup>206</sup> Source : Enquête : les effets du port du masque sur les jeunes enfants en lieux d'accueil collectif ([lesprosdela petiteenfance.fr](#)).

difficult between ECEC staff or with families because of the increased noise level. Finally, 'inclusive' masks (with a transparent shield covering the mouth) present some limitations: they can be uncomfortable to wear as they gather mist and droplets and become foggy. Overall, ECEC staff indicated that their working conditions worsened during the pandemic.

All in all, the survey highlights that ECEC staff are split regarding the consequences on children. On the one hand, children seem to have adapted to the situation. On the other hand, the masks have impacted their development.

Dr Nawal Abboub, specialist in cognitive sciences and babies' brains, provided an analysis<sup>207</sup> that went against the findings presented above. For instance, she gave reassurances that language development relied primarily on the adults' eyes for babies between birth and 6 months old and over 12 months old, and not so much on the mouths. However, the focus on the mouth was quite prevalent for babies between 6 and 8 months of age. Previous studies also showed that babies could use other signals to recognise faces, perceive emotions or understand language. For instance, smiling could be heard in the voice, despite the mask hiding the smile. Finally, Dr Abboub encouraged ECEC practitioners to use other strategies in their interactions with children (for instance, emphasising body language messages) and to question the masks' impacts on children, with their colleagues or with the children's families.

Another recent study also shows that children's ability to identify and respond to another person's emotion, and the resulting social interactions, may not have been significantly altered by wearing a mask during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study authors point out that children not only use facial expressions but also derive an emotional signal from body posture and facial colouring<sup>208</sup>.

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<sup>207</sup> Petite enfance : Attention au mythe du grand méchant masque !  
(lesprosdela petiteenfance.fr).

<sup>208</sup> Etude : Le masque aurait un impact limité sur les interactions sociales des enfants  
(lesprosdela petiteenfance.fr).

## Governance, monitoring and evaluation

**The ECEC governance system is very complex in most European countries, with many decision-makers involved, especially in split-system countries, where more than one ministry supervises the ECEC sector<sup>209</sup>. In the context of the pandemic, this has sometimes created difficulties.**

- For instance, in Bulgaria nurseries and kindergartens are under the responsibility of local government. However, national guidelines for running kindergartens during the 2020-2021 school year were published on the Ministry of Health's official COVID-19 website. Additionally, some municipalities introduced their own procedures for action in COVID-19 cases in schools and kindergartens following the general guidelines and complying with the relevant order from the Minister of Health. The measures were decided by municipalities, regional education managements and regional Health inspectorates. However, kindergarten directors were authorised to act immediately in COVID-19 cases.
- In Germany, the large variety of ECEC providers and the country's federal structure meant that the rules on the organisation of everyday life in crèches and kindergarten and ways to react in case of infections varied, sometimes greatly, from state to state, from municipality to municipality and even from institution to institution. While this may have created some confusion, it also enabled local measures to be adopted swiftly to contain limited outbreaks of the virus.

**The European Quality Framework for ECEC establishes monitoring and evaluation as one of the main components for achieving quality. In the context of the pandemic, it has been noted that data and research into ECEC during the pandemic was scarce, preventing close monitoring and an evaluation of the pandemic's impact on ECEC institutions and staff, as well as on children and families. It was particularly noted that most of the focus was on other levels of education such as primary, secondary and higher education.**

Experts have, for instance, noted the absence of data on attendance in ECEC throughout 2020 in Ireland, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Portugal, Malta, Estonia, Greece and Croatia. In most cases this seems to be due to a lack of any system to collect and report data at national level. In Hungary and Czechia, this lack of data was also true for children of compulsory attendance age.

In a literature review, the Lego Foundation also notes that 'One of the main takeaways from this rapid evidence review is the dearth of research on play during the period of COVID-19 lockdowns and gradual reopening. While research considers learning broadly, and distance learning in particular, the crucial nature of play in child development and the potential of lockdowns to affect how children engage in play, has not found its way into research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic during the period covered in this review<sup>210</sup>.

**Some interesting initiatives are, however, worth noting in terms of monitoring attendance.** One such initiative comes from the Netherlands: in October 2020, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment published figures for childcare in the second quarter of 2020<sup>211</sup>. The report concerned the use of the childcare allowance, the

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<sup>209</sup> For a description of split-systems and integrated systems, see [Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2019 Edition | Eurydice \(europa.eu\)](#).

<sup>210</sup> [LEGO Nurturing Care and COVID-19: Research Briefs | FHI 360](#).

<sup>211</sup>

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/publicaties/2020/10/22/>

development of the average hourly price of childcare and the number of locations in day care.

The effects of the first COVID-19 wave are visible in this: 3 000 fewer children made use of childcare than in the first quarter of 2020<sup>212</sup>. To investigate the use of childcare from 8 June 2020 onwards, Kantar (consulting company), on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, mapped a sample of 1 619 parents from families with children in the age category 0 to 12 years<sup>213</sup>. The sample consisted of 89% of families with two parents, both working, and 11% of single-parent families, in which the parent is employed. The data were collected through an online survey. The results showed that 13% of the total number of families and 21% of the entitled families used emergency shelters. Most of the surveyed parents had a positive experience in the emergency shelter, because the experience took place at a trusted shelter. More than half of the parents surveyed would find it acceptable for crucial professions to be given priority in childcare when there are waiting lists. Especially the families who themselves work in the care/crucial sector more often think that there should be priority in waiting lists for people working in a crucial profession. 10% of the parents indicated that they made use of informal childcare provided by grandparents prior to the COVID-19 crisis, but not after 8 June 2020. However, the number of days of use of childcare from 8 June is virtually the same for all types of children before the COVID-19 crisis. One third of parents made less use of – or completely stopped using – the day care facility because they were working from home. Most parents who made less use of or completely stopped (in)formal childcare took on the childcare task themselves (enabled by home-office situations, resulting in situations where parents work from home and take care of children at the same time). 4 in 10 parents who usually make more use of formal childcare indicated making more use of this because of their reduced use of informal childcare. And most parents have no need for, or experience no obstacle in, making more use of the type of childcare for their children since 8 June than they do now<sup>214</sup>.

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[cijfers-kinderopvang-tweede-kwartaal-2020/2e+Kwartaalverslagage+kinderopvang+2020.pdf](#).

<sup>212</sup>

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/publicaties/2020/10/22/cijfers-kinderopvang-tweede-kwartaal-2020/2e+Kwartaalverslagage+kinderopvang+2020.pdf>.

<sup>213</sup>

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2020/09/15/effecten-van-de-coronacrisis-op-de-kinderopvang/244408046+-+SZW+-+Effect+coronacrisis+%28kinder%29opvang+-+definitieve+rapportage.pdf>.

<sup>214</sup> Idem.

## Positive changes

**While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normal education and care and created many challenges, it also paved the way for new experiences and changes which can be positive and should be maintained after the pandemic. Examples of these include smaller groups of children, deeper relationships with parents, improved hygiene routines, and the promotion of outdoor learning.**

- Teachers in Norway noted that as a result of smaller group sizes and more favourable adult-child ratios, they were able to interact with each child more frequently and to follow up on children's interests more fully<sup>215</sup>. This was also mentioned in Denmark, where kindergarten leaders were asked to assess whether they wished to maintain any changes when kindergartens resumed more normal operation. Additional changes they wanted to maintain fell into the following categories: changed practices for dropping children off (distancing, outside areas only); hygiene focus; increased outdoor life; adaptation of the arrangements for holding staff meetings and parent meetings. A survey of Finnish ECEC staff also confirms this<sup>216</sup>.
- The Estonian Association of Pre-primary Education Leaders (Alushariduse Juhtide Ühendus) emphasised that a natural environment (forest, bog, home garden) should be valued as a learning environment in addition to the virtual environment when talking about hybrid learning<sup>217</sup>. To prevent the spread of the virus, parents were not allowed to enter the kindergarten and children were handed over to staff outdoors in the morning and collected in the evening. As a result, children spent more time outdoors than before, which both teachers and most parents appreciated. Kindergartens, in cooperation with families, have improved their outdoor areas created outdoor learning centres, built sensor paths and mud kitchens, improved outdoor lighting, created active centres.
- In Italy, documents issued by the government for the reopening of educational and school institutions paid specific attention to the pedagogical approaches to be adopted with young children. Guidance on the reopening of ECEC centres was provided in two national-level documents. The first explicitly states that physical distancing among children in ECEC should be replaced by rethinking the arrangement of spaces (i.e. more use of outdoor facilities)/time/materials and grouping strategies, in order to guarantee separation between fixed groups ('bubbles'), rather than between individual children or between children and adults. An entire section of the document was dedicated to the *importance of developing practices that ensure integrated education and care for young children*: there, the importance of ensuring *smooth and inclusive transitions between the home and ECEC environment (ambientamento)* was explicitly acknowledged, also with reference to preschool institutions<sup>218</sup>. The second document further stressed the necessity to adopt sanitary protocols while paying concurrent attention to *children's*

<sup>215</sup> The Coronavirus Pandemic and Lessons Learned in Preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States: OMEP Policy Forum – Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid; Wagner, Judith T; Eriksen Ødegaard, Elin. Springer Verlag. International journal of early childhood, 2020-06-17.

<sup>216</sup> [https://karvi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/KARVI\\_T0421.pdf](https://karvi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/KARVI_T0421.pdf).

<sup>217</sup> Kala, H., (2020). *Ellujäämise kunstid – kohanemine uues reaalsuses*. (The arts of survival - adapting to a new reality). *Õpetajate Leht*, 6.11.2020 <https://opleht.ee/2020/11/ellujaamise-kunstid-kohanemine-uues-reaalsuses/>.

<sup>218</sup> Ministry of Education (Italy) (2020, June 26). *Piano scuola 2020-2021. Documento per la pianificazione delle attività scolastiche, educative e formative in tutte le Istituzioni del Sistema nazionale di Istruzione* <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/2467413/Le+linee+guida.pdf/4e4bb411-1f90-9502-f01e-d8841a949429>.

*well-being and to pedagogical quality*, thus ensuring that children attending ECEC are not limited in their bodily expression and movement, nor in their freedom to explore the environment and to interact and socialise with peers and adults<sup>219</sup>.

- The move towards increased outdoor learning is illustrated by this Irish ECEC professional: 'The covid-19 pandemic has caused us to reflect further on our practice and with public health authorities encouraging preschools to be outdoors as much as possible, we saw this as an opportunity rather than a limitation'<sup>220</sup>.
- In Portugal, specialists in paediatrics and psychology welcomed the ministry rules that promoted the organisation of smaller classes, as well as the strategies to optimise good hygiene practices, such as shoes worn on the street not entering the day care centre, children washing their hands more often, and teaching materials being cleaned daily, as these strategies reduce the risk of any type of infection.

### **The pandemic was also an opportunity to encourage ECEC staff to acquire or develop digital skills.**

In Estonia, kindergarten teachers' digital competences and cooperation skills have significantly improved, as has the digital infrastructure in kindergartens. Some teachers who were sceptical about the use of digital tools have increasingly started to recognise their importance and potential to expand collaboration opportunities, enrich learning and educational activities<sup>221</sup>. In a large survey on the conditions in ECEC during the spring 2020 wave of the pandemic, run by the Regional Administration of Western Finland<sup>222</sup>, respondents mentioned that pre-primary teachers have started to cooperate more, learned to master electronic materials and digital equipment, developed their skills and adapted to new ways of working.

The National Education Institute of Slovenia organised seminars on improving the digital competences of preschool teachers ('IJZ 2-Corona seminars') in order to support kindergartens. These ran from November 2020 to March 2021. Based on the increased need to use ICT in kindergartens, both among professionals and in working with parents and educational work with children, the institute proposed five seminars: Children and digital technology, Digital stories, Documentation through a web application, Promoting dialogue and early and media literacy through ICT, Counselling work and current needs of children and adults in kindergarten. The seminars were attended by 800 participants. The National Education Institute of Slovenia also proposed a course via e-lessons on the topic of teleworking for kindergarten staff (from November 2020 onwards). These started with short training sessions for kindergarten staff and preschool teachers to get to know and try out different online environments they could use to meet each other remotely, hold

<sup>219</sup> Ministry of Education (Italy). (2020c, August 3). *Documento di indirizzo e orientamento per la ripresa delle attività in presenza dei servizi educativi e delle scuole dell'infanzia*. Retrieved from:

[www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/49967/Documento+di+indirizzo+e+orientamento+per+la+ripresa+delle+attivit%C3%A0+in+presenza+0-6.pdf/3dece725-15d4-4e11-2bd0-08c553abf4bf?version=1.0&t=1598433830351](http://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/49967/Documento+di+indirizzo+e+orientamento+per+la+ripresa+delle+attivit%C3%A0+in+presenza+0-6.pdf/3dece725-15d4-4e11-2bd0-08c553abf4bf?version=1.0&t=1598433830351).

<sup>220</sup> A Positive Opportunity: Covid-19 and Outdoor Play | Leadership for Inclusion, LINC Programme.

<sup>221</sup> Sarapuu, E., (2020). *Lasteaednike muutunud argipäev*. (The everyday life of kindergarten teachers has changed). *Õpetajate Leht*, 6.11.2020. <https://opleht.ee/2020/11/ellujaamise-kunstid-kohanemine-uues-reaalsuses/>.

<sup>222</sup> Kyllönen, M., Liljeström A., Sundell T., Tahvanainen R., Kivikangas M. (2020). *Varhaiskasvatus, esi- ja perusopetus poikkeusolojen aikana keväällä 2020 [ECEC during the poandemic in spring]*. *Opetus- ja kulttuuritoimi 2020 Länsi- ja Sisä-Suomen aluehallintoviraston julkaisu*.

workshops, work in small groups and consider which individual tools can be used for meeting children.

### **Communication skills were enhanced and new ways of working in teams and other institutions were developed.**

An Estonian survey of heads of childcare institutions found that listening and attentiveness in communication with colleagues and parents is a crucial skill for teachers and heads of kindergartens. Anxiety and insecurity over the crisis affected staff as well as parents and children, sometimes resulting in insulting and derogatory communication, even hate speech. This also underlines the need to develop cooperation and self-regulation skills among kindergarten staff members, which can be considered as one of the main lessons of this new kind of reality (Kala 2020). Another Estonian study highlighted the importance of fostering collaboration between child protection services and early childhood educators<sup>223</sup>.

While the pandemic created stress and anxiety for many ECEC staff, regular staff meetings provided an opportunity for them to talk openly about the risks of travelling to and from the centre on trains and buses, as well as the possibility of exposure to the virus from close contact with children who might be carriers. They also worried about spreading the virus to their own families. Voicing these concerns enabled the staff to encourage and support one another<sup>224</sup>.

In Denmark, experience shows that case-by-case collaboration between the municipalities and institutions in which vulnerable children are enrolled intensified during the institutional closures and during the reopening of the institutions. The head of an institution or the social educator, who normally would be in daily contact with a challenged child, would call the family at least once a week to assess the situation, focusing on aspects such as the child's well-being and daily life and rhythm. They would ask questions on the challenges faced by the child and their family in order to assess if emergency care or any other form of support was needed. The focus of the support calls has been on maintaining the known routines and close relationships in the child's life, as well as on continuing close cooperation with the parents. Videos were also posted on institutions' Facebook pages for virtual contact with the children at home. Some municipalities established telephone hotlines where parents could call for advice and support. Other institutions located in disadvantaged areas transferred social educators to the area playgrounds as an immediately accessible resource for challenged families<sup>225</sup>.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, Slovenian kindergarten counsellors (psychologists in every kindergarten) have reported on new challenges and increased needs for content and professional discussion on specific topics, for which the National Education Institute of Slovenia proposed training and meetings on various occasions. Already in the spring of 2020, efforts focused on how to mitigate the increase in risk factors in vulnerable groups of preschool children, who were mostly in home care during the epidemic. These risk factors were: the problem of socio-economic conditions of families, children with special

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<sup>223</sup> Toros, K., Tart, K. & Falch-Eriksen, A. Collaboration of Child Protective Services and Early Childhood Educators: Enhancing the Well-Being of Children in Need. *Early Childhood Educ J* 49, 995–1006 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01149-y>.

<sup>224</sup> *The Coronavirus Pandemic and Lessons Learned in Preschools in Norway, Sweden and the United States: OMEP Policy Forum* - Pramling Samuelsson, Ingrid; Wagner, Judith T; Eriksen Ødegaard, Elin. Springer Verlag. International journal of early childhood, 2020-06-17.

<sup>225</sup> Kommunernes Landsforening, 2020. *Kommuners og skolars arbejde med at række ud til udsatte børn og unge og deres famili*. <https://www.kl.dk/media/23902/kommuners-og-skolars-arbejde-med-at-raekke-ud-til-udsatte-boern-og-unge-og-deres-familier-under-covid-19.pdf>.



needs, highly vulnerable children, children with higher potential and contact with parents in crisis. In addition, the training and meetings highlighted the importance of introducing children to kindergarten, the importance of routine in times of crisis, protecting children's mental health through social and emotional learning, promoting psychological resilience in times of crisis, and the usefulness of mindfulness exercises to regulate emotions. Demanding cases experienced by counsellors were discussed in smaller groups. The institute prepared its own curricular document entitled *Programme Guidelines – Kindergarten Counselling Service for interactive enrichment with literature and case studies*. Many counsellors participated in research on the epidemic's impact on their work and were presented with the results at study meetings with their colleagues.

## Recommendations

Throughout 2020 and 2021, experts and stakeholders made recommendations in position papers and during numerous online events. These are summarised below.

### Governance and funding of ECEC

- The educational role of ECEC needs to be better acknowledged and supported by society and decision-makers, beyond just the crucial role of childcare that was evident during lockdowns.
- Public investment in the sector must be increased, or at least maintained at pre-pandemic levels.
- Investment should be made in improving infrastructures (additional spaces, outdoor spaces, adequate hygiene facilities, monitoring of air quality).
- Responsibilities should be clarified and cooperation between decision-makers improved, to serve all families and children equally; simplification of governance would also help.
- Cooperation between the various services that work with children and families should be developed in order to provide a holistic and integrated response to their needs.
- Investment should be increased in:
  - high-quality teaching methods using new technologies for ECEC, either in ECEC settings or for distance learning;
  - the development of age-appropriate digital learning materials to improve the cognitive development and learning of children;
  - support for the development of teachers' digital competence in the ECEC sector.

### ECEC staff

- Improve the recognition, education and training, status and working conditions (including wages) of all ECEC staff, including assistants, who play a crucial role in providing high-quality education and care.
- Prioritise ECEC staff in COVID-19 management strategies (testing, equipment, vaccinations).
- Work more closely with families in order to facilitate transitions.
- Systematically inform staff of/train them on contingency plans, emergency and other non-standard procedures.

### Children's learning and well-being

- Keep ECEC facilities open as much as possible, even during lockdowns, and encourage attendance of all children.
- Provide financial support to families that use subsidised school canteen services to continue to ensure adequate food intake for children during school closures.
- Raise greater awareness of the risks for young children of overexposure to screens.
- Take measures to identify potential learning loss, language developmental delays, social and emotional difficulties and ways of addressing them; train ECEC staff on how to implement these measures.
- Fund research into the long-term impact of the pandemic on children, both in terms of well-being and cognitive development.

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