

**first years**  
*first priority*

**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**



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**EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN  
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

co-led by **Eurochild** and the **International Step by Step Association**,  
in partnership with the Roma Education Fund  
and the European Public Health Alliance



**#FirstYearsFirstPriority**  
**FirstYearsFirstPriority.eu**

## *Why* a campaign on early childhood development?

**There is overwhelming evidence from neuroscience on the importance of early childhood experiences for healthy brain development, in particular in relation to self-regulation, empathy, self-confidence and the ability to learn and build positive relationships. In addition, children exposed to prolonged adversity in their first months and years, are less equipped to cope with adversity later in life, potentially resulting in risk factors having a cumulative or ‘snowballing’ effect. Studies also show that many of the major public health concerns experienced in adult life (e.g. obesity, heart disease, and mental health problems) link to experiences during the first 1,000 days.**

Despite the evidence, this stage in the life cycle receives relatively little attention in politics and public policies. Many policies impact early childhood development (ECD), but they rarely prioritize child’s best interest or tackling inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching effects on families and communities, adding new challenges to the already existing and long-lasting ones.

This is a time of extraordinary opportunity for systemic change across society. It is essential to prioritise public investments that empower and strengthen vulnerable groups and families. European and national institutions need to provide concrete responses to stop the escalation of poverty and social inequality.

## The Campaign *focus*

**The *First Years First Priority Campaign* focuses on prioritizing children from birth to 6 years, with a special attention to the first 1,000 days - the period from conception to the end of a child's second year, and to those who are most vulnerable, such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrants and refugee children, children at risk of entering, or in, alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty.**

During their first years, children's experience of family life is probably the single most important factor in their development and well-being. Parents know what their children need. However, the life circumstances of some families can make it extremely difficult for them to fulfill their roles. Poverty, insecurity, adverse living environments, systemic discrimination based on ethnicity, disability, or social-economic status, all have a drastic impact on parents' capacity to provide their children with safe and healthy environments, adequate nutrition, responsive care, and opportunities for learning and play.

Too often public authorities fail to ensure adequate protection and support to vulnerable parents and young children. Relevant and essential services are either not available or not accessible to those who would benefit most. Too many children are therefore missing a fair start in their life with a long-term impact on their future and the future of society as a whole.



## What the Campaign *stands for*

The campaign is rooted in an understanding that, from the day they are born, all children are rights holders despite their dependency status. We will advocate for more political visibility and resource allocation to early childhood in general. Within that overall framework, we will focus on children who are most vulnerable such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrants and refugee children, children at risk of entering, or in, alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty. We will look at how policies and public investment can tackle inequalities from the earliest age.

- We advocate for comprehensive, multidisciplinary interventions that address the multi-faceted challenges of families and children who are at greater risk of discrimination and exclusion. The whole society will be better off if the most vulnerable are included.
- We advocate for support to parents with young children and for increased access of families and young children to essential early childhood services, to realize children's rights and ensure them with equal opportunities to safe, healthy and optimal development.

The Campaign aims to influence the EU and harness its power to lead on policy recommendations and support funding, primarily within EU Member States, but also in neighborhood countries.

By building a strong community of ECD advocates at the EU and national level, the campaign will help to ensure ECD stays high on the political agenda. We want policy makers, in the countries engaged in the campaign and in EU institutions, to better understand how ECD promotes inclusion and to commit to adopting an integrated and multi-sectoral approach to ECD.



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## The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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