

**Nurturing care from the start:  
First Years First Priority campaign position paper on the  
European Care Strategy**

**February 2022**

**Introduction**

The [First Years First Priority](#) campaign welcomes the announcement by the European Commission to develop a **European Care Strategy**<sup>1</sup>, and the commitment by the Council of the European Union to ‘promote active and healthy ageing, as well as the accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare and long-term care, including through enhancing support for formal and informal carers.’<sup>2</sup> We support calls from civil society actors<sup>3</sup> for a ‘life-course’ and continuum of care approach, which considers **care needs from infancy and throughout people’s lives**.

Access to quality care is part of a strong ‘social Europe’ as envisaged in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. While the delivery of care is a national competence of Member States, and national models differ, there are commonalities. An EU-wide vision of care could improve access and quality, ensure that the needs of children, families and communities are met, and that the dignity and rights of carers and those being cared for are upheld.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put unprecedented strain on the delivery of care, both formal and informal, impacting all age groups. Children and families have been profoundly affected, with particular disruptions to childcare, early childhood education, child protection services, care for children in alternative settings and children with disabilities and special educational needs.

The proposal for a European Care Strategy is an opportunity to implement a vision of care that addresses the needs of children – from the start - especially those facing poverty and social exclusion, and their families and caregivers, and that responds to the problems that have been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> *State of the Union 2021*, European Commission

<sup>2</sup> *Taking forward the Strategic Agenda 18-month Programme of the Council (1 January 2022 - 30 June 2023)*, Council of the European Union, 10 December 2021

<sup>3</sup> *European Care Strategy - The EU as a driving force for better care for all?* AGE Platform Europe, 13 October 2021

## The importance of care in the early years

Children – especially in their earliest years – rely on care and caregivers. Investing early in **nurturing care for all children is essential** for their healthy development and the wellbeing and prosperity of communities and society. Care work is done by parents, families and other caregivers – whether paid or unpaid – with women taking on the bulk of caring responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Nurturing care<sup>5</sup> for very young children provides the foundation for children to reach their full potential and shapes their preparation for school and beyond.<sup>6</sup> Despite increased understanding of the importance of caring for children for their healthy development and wellbeing, especially children with particular or complex needs, the availability, affordability and quality of formal care services remains a challenge, with many children and families not able to access quality services throughout infancy and childhood. As the fulfilment of caring responsibilities falls overwhelmingly on women, the European Care Strategy is also an opportunity to identify ways to encourage, enable and support fathers and men to play a much more substantial role in caring for very young children.

Access to quality care and support during pregnancy, childbirth and infancy is an essential component of nurturing care and a determinant of mothers' and infants' wellbeing. This requires access to quality care in the pre-natal period for all women and children, especially those who face particular barriers, such as those from Roma communities, those with irregular migration status and those living in poverty<sup>7</sup>. Access to skilled and qualified midwives and home visiting services in the pre- and post-natal period are vital interventions.

Home visiting services in early childhood are a key intervention<sup>8</sup> to help families and caregivers and enable children to thrive, providing support in the community and addressing specific needs, including nurturing parental and caregiving skills and countering isolation, stress and disadvantage.

Providing quality care to young children in the environments they live, grow and develop means providing quality care to their families and caregivers too, across generations. This requires a comprehensive view of care policies across age groups, starting from pre-birth to older age. Early childhood intervention services should be part of comprehensive and responsive early childhood systems, enabling problems to be identified and addressed as early as possible.

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<sup>4</sup> *Gender inequalities in care and pay in the EU*, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), November 2020

<sup>5</sup> *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* (2018) WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, Every Woman Every Child, PMNCH, Early Childhood Development Action Network

<sup>6</sup> Richter L, Black M, Britto P, et al. *Early childhood development: an imperative for action and measurement at scale*. BMJ Global Health, 2019

<sup>7</sup> *Access to maternal health and midwifery for vulnerable groups in the EU*, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union, European Parliament, April 2019

<sup>8</sup> May A and Poppe J, *Early Childhood Home Visiting. What Legislators Need to Know*, National Conference of State Legislatures, November 2019

## Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Despite growing enrolment, many children still don't have access to high-quality ECEC, especially those facing poverty and social exclusion<sup>9</sup> who often attend services that offer poorer quality. Ethnic segregation in educational settings, the lack of inclusiveness and the low quality of services are major hindering factors. For many families, such as those from ethnic minorities or migrant backgrounds, who are more frequently exposed to such issues, ECEC settings can feel unwelcoming. In many countries, Roma children are significantly less likely to attend preschool than other children, and face a range of barriers to access<sup>10</sup>. This requires targeted interventions to support very young children from minority communities, such as Roma children. All EU Member States have lower enrolment rates for children from ethnic minorities, refugee children, children with special needs and those from lower socio-economic groups, compared to the general population. Children in rural areas, those living in internally displaced communities and children of economic migrants working in other countries as caregivers, face particular barriers to accessing quality ECEC.

The early childhood workforce is often inadequately prepared, undervalued and underpaid. Public investment in ECEC remains lower than other stages of education, impacting accessibility and quality.<sup>11</sup> There is a need to improve the quality of pedagogy, including with ongoing training opportunities, and ensuring a welcoming environment for children from different backgrounds, with targeted programmes and increased awareness of social inequality among teachers and staff. By increasing and valuing diversity in ECEC, and improving the capacities and satisfaction of the workforce, the quality of early childhood experiences can significantly improve.

Where no crèches, pre-school or day-care centres are available, interventions such as playgroups, reading groups and toy libraries can support caregivers to provide nurturing care for very young children.

In accordance with the ECEC quality framework parents and caregivers must be included as partners in ECEC programmes<sup>12</sup>. ECEC settings should encourage this participation by involving parents, families and carers in decision-making processes and reaching out to those facing particular difficulties, such as single-parent families and minority or migrant families – with targeted initiatives and support.

Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights states that 'children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality'. The European Care Strategy should help make this ambition a reality.

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<sup>9</sup> Bove C., and Sharmahd N. *Beyond invisibility. Welcoming children and families with migrant and refugee background in ECEC settings*, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal 2020, VOL. 28, NO. 1, 1–9

<sup>10</sup> Romani Early Years Network; Klaus S, and Siraj I, *Improving Roma participation in European early childhood education systems through cultural brokering*, London Review of Education, UCL Institute of Education Press

<sup>11</sup> *Starting Strong VI. Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD, 2021

<sup>12</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, (2019/C 189/02)

## Family and community-based care

Despite the EU's commitment to the deinstitutionalisation of children in alternative care and to transition to quality family and community-based care, thousands of children remain in residential care in EU countries<sup>13</sup>. Placement in institutional care is not in children's best interests, and is particularly harmful to very young children, by significantly disrupting a healthy life-course development<sup>14</sup>.

Children with disabilities must be supported with the appropriate level of care that meets their needs, and enables them to live as autonomously as possible and enjoy their rights. To ensure children with disabilities can stay with their families, a range of measures need to be developed that will support home and community-based care services. These key services must be integrated with healthcare, social care, education, financial and other measures that support children with disabilities and their carers.

Parenting support programmes for the improvement of parenting skills play an important role in nurturing parent-child relationships and reducing parental stress, with positive outcomes for children. These should be accompanied by adequate social protection systems that address the root causes of poor parenting, such as family poverty and deprivation, and provide an effective safety net. Emergency funds, (eg vouchers for food or medical needs) should be available in community-based programmes, to support families and caregivers with young children, especially given the impacts of Covid-19.

The European Care Strategy should fully commit to the transitioning from institutional care to community and family-based care services, and support increased investment in measures that assist parents and guardians in their role as primary caregivers for young children.

## Recommendations

We would welcome a European Care Strategy that:

- Sets out a comprehensive, positive, ambitious and **life-cycle approach to care across the EU** – from birth, infancy and childhood, throughout the life-course. This requires an integrated and multi-sector collaboration across relevant government departments and European Commission DGs.

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<sup>13</sup> *Final findings from the DataCare project make a clear case for monitoring progress in deinstitutionalisation*, Eurochild and UNICEF, December 2021

<sup>14</sup> van IJendoorn MH, Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, Duschinsky R, et al *Institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of children 1: a systematic and integrative review of evidence regarding effects on development*, *Lancet Psychiatry* 2020; 7: 703–20

Such a strategy should be based on fundamental rights and outline ways in which the EU can support Member States, develop a quality framework and catalyse best practice.

- Identifies ways to ensure **more public investment in early childhood services**, as a government priority, including strengthening the capacity, remuneration and professional development of carers so they can respond to children's care needs, with particular attention and investment in caring for children living in poverty and exclusion and those with complex and multiple needs.
- Recognises that **care services for young children and families need to respond to their actual needs and demands**, taking into consideration the great diversity within and across age groups, to help prevent social inequalities. Inter-sectoral work and governance across national and sub-national levels should enable the development of responsive cross-sectoral care strategies, policies and services.
- Supports the development and **strengthening of community-based programmes** - including parenting support, home visiting services and early intervention services - and day-care centres for children and families at risk, including very young children, to prevent separation of children from their families and increase access to services for families at risk.
- Supports **local authorities to plan for integrated early childhood services** as part of their local development strategies and budgeting, and enable them to address families' and caregivers' needs at community level, in line with national plans and priorities, and support participative and transparent cross-sector planning, based on families' needs.
- Supports the development of a **monitoring system** with a shared set of indicators to measure effective early childhood intervention and care services, building on evidence-based research and best practice.
- Sets out ways to ensure that **care workers are adequately recognised, supported and remunerated**, and have access to occupational training, health and safety and security, with opportunities for professional development and work-life balance.
- Sets out ways to **engage and support fathers and men** to take a more central role in caring responsibilities, including the care of children in their earliest years.
- Ensures the **meaningful engagement of relevant stakeholders** - European and national civil society organisations, parents, families, caregivers and children - in the development, implementation and evaluation of a Care Strategy.

- Supports Member States' implementation of the **European Child Guarantee** as an opportunity to increase public investment in care services for children, including ECEC services, and to strengthen caregivers' capacity and expertise to respond to children's care needs, from childbirth and infancy, especially those most in need.

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