



A FAIR START FOR EVERY CHILD IN EUROPE
Submission from the *First Years First Priority* campaign to the European Commission open consultation on *Pathways to School Success*
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Quality education provided by schools plays a fundamental role in shaping children's lives and advancing equal opportunities. The European Commission's initiative on *Pathways to School Success* is therefore welcome, with its potential to contribute to addressing inequalities between and within countries and fostering social inclusion in the EU.

Children's ability to learn and acquire skills and competencies, however, does not start in school. Children's experiences in their earliest years – from zero to six years old – are fundamental in shaping their cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development and enabling them to learn and thrive at school and reach their full potential. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a crucial role in preparing children for school. Yet ECEC provision, access, affordability and quality vary significantly between and within countries, especially for children under three and those at risk of, or facing, poverty and social exclusion.

This submission highlights the need for more attention to, and investment in, public policies that support very young children and their families, especially those facing inequalities and social exclusion from their earliest years and into their schooling. We also highlight the importance of ensuring the *Pathways to School Success* initiative improves access to high-quality ECEC, especially for children under the age of three from vulnerable groups and disproportionately affected by disparities in accessing quality ECEC services.

Early childhood development – the foundation

There is irrefutable evidence that children's experiences in early childhood shape their development, health and wellbeing, and influence their educational attainment and lifelong opportunities.¹ Investing early in nurturing care for all children is essential for their healthy development - physical and mental - and lifelong learning, and for the wellbeing and prosperity of society. Therefore, public investment in early childhood is one of the most effective policy measures that governments can take, with benefits for children, families and society, helping to reduce inequalities from the first years of life.

Nurturing care² for very young children – including health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving and safety and security – provides the foundation for children to reach their full potential and shapes their preparation for school.³ The ability of families and caregivers to enable pre-school children to benefit from play, reading, drawing, story-telling and other cultural activities, is crucial for promoting early learning and school readiness.⁴

Addressing poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination

Around a quarter of children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with child poverty expected to rise due to Covid-19.⁵ Poverty affects children's physical and psychological development in many ways and also puts enormous pressure on parents/caregivers, making them less able to respond to young children's needs. In addition, prolonged exposure to adversity and toxic stress⁶ in

¹ *Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale*, The Lancet, 2016

² *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

³ Richter L, Black M, Britto P, et al. *Early childhood development: an imperative for action and measurement at scale*. BMJ Global Health, 2019

⁴ *The formative years. UNICEF's work on measuring early childhood development* UNICEF

⁵ Joint Declaration by Ministers of the EPSCO Council, December 2020

⁶ *INBRIEF The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

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early childhood can damage learning, behaviour, and health across the lifespan. Some population groups, including Roma children, migrant and refugee children and those with disabilities, are particularly affected by severe poverty⁷, leading to health and social inequalities in adulthood. Housing deprivation is also a barrier to some children's access to education and school attendance, affecting their educational attainment and health and wellbeing. Therefore, ensuring adequate social protection systems that prevent family poverty and provide an effective safety net should be a public policy priority and is key to supporting children's learning and reducing inequalities.

Need investment in universal access to quality ECEC

Despite growing enrolment, many children still don't have access to high-quality ECEC services, especially those facing poverty and social exclusion who often attend ECEC services of poorer quality. 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. 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 addition, the early childhood workforce is often inadequately prepared, undervalued and underpaid. Public investment in ECEC remains lower than other stages of education, impacting on access and quality⁸. There is a need to improve the quality of teaching, 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.

Our data analysis on early childhood showed the need to guarantee universal access to ECEC services, particularly for children under three and those most in need. In addition, despite targeted policies for children in vulnerable situations, a lack of infrastructure and insufficient preparation and capacity to respond to their specific needs hinder access to quality ECEC, and contribute to disparities between urban and rural areas in many countries.

Addressing these disparities requires increased public investment in ECEC alongside greater support for families with young children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and strengthening the capacity and professional development of ECEC staff to respond to children's needs in their earliest years, with tailored expertise and support for the most disadvantaged and those with additional needs.

Role of the EU and Member States

Pathways to School Success complements existing EU initiatives to realise children's rights and promote social inclusion, including through education. The European Child Guarantee, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan provide incentives for Member States to tackle child poverty and social exclusion as a national priority. These frameworks recommend multi-sector integrated approaches and comprehensive action plans that can support children and families from the start. The European Commission has an important role in supporting Member States to implement ambitious strategies and ensuring that all children can have the best start in life, as a foundation for their learning in school and beyond. The proposed Council Recommendation on *Pathways to School Success* is an opportunity to recognize the importance of early childhood development, investing in children's early years and reducing inequalities from the first years of life.

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⁷ *Combating child poverty: an issue of fundamental rights*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018

⁸ *Starting Strong VI. Supporting Meaningful Interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD, 2021