

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2024

FIRST YEARS, FIRST PRIORITY MESSAGES TO POLITICAL GROUPS IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

**Early Years Matter
Putting early childhood at the heart of a social Europe**

May 2023

Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) co-lead a campaign to highlight the need for more attention to, and public investment in, early childhood development (ECD), and ensure that all children can have the best start in life. The Roma Education Fund (REF) and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) are associate partners in the campaign.

The campaign, *First Years, First Priority*, A Fair Start for Every Child, works with civil society partners in 10 countries – France, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Ireland, Hungary, Finland, Serbia and Slovakia. These National Coordinators bring together coalitions of organisations to increase attention to, and public funding for, early childhood development in their country. The campaign seeks to leverage EU initiatives – including the European Child Guarantee and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child - to catalyse action on early childhood at the national and EU levels. We want to increase support for ECD in government policy-making and public investment, as well as among families, communities and the general public, so that it becomes a public policy priority.

Key Messages

Ahead of the European Parliament elections in June 2024, we urge all Political Groups to support and promote greater investment in early childhood development, as part of the EU's ambition to fight poverty and social exclusion and fostering a stronger social Europe which protects and promotes the rights of all children, from their youngest years.

The **European Parliament has been at the forefront of efforts to tackle child poverty and advance children's rights in Europe**, including through the European Child Guarantee and the European Pillar of Social Rights. The mandate of the European Parliament Coordinator on Children's Rights plays a key role in promoting children's rights within the Parliament and other EU institutions and advancing the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child adopted in March 2021. The role of the European Parliament cross-party Child Rights Intergroup has also ensured that children's rights are an integral part of the EU agenda. The European Parliament has played a pivotal role in the creation of the Child Guarantee, first proposing the idea in 2017, and adopted several Resolutions in support of children – including on a common European action on care and universal quality education from early childhood. It has highlighted the specific needs of children facing particular vulnerabilities and disadvantage, including Roma children, children with disabilities, and refugee and migrant children.

We urge all Political Groups to support early childhood development in the EU, as a public policy priority, and to include commitments to children's rights in their manifestos by:

- ❖ Maintaining and strengthening the European Parliament's Child Rights Intergroup and its role in upholding and promoting children's rights in early childhood.
- ❖ Continuing to support the mandates of the European Parliament Coordinator on Children's Rights and the European Commission Coordinator for the Rights of the Child.
- ❖ Retaining the European Parliament Working Group on the Child Guarantee and ensure that early childhood is a key focus of Member States' implementation.
- ❖ Maintaining the European Commission Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care.

Public investment in children's early years is crucial

Increased support and public investment in nurturing care and quality early years services are essential for tackling child poverty, inequality and social exclusion. The first 1000 days of a child's life are a time of unique and rapid development, and highly influenced by children's environment, early experiences and interactions.¹ These experiences affect brain development, shaping children's cognitive, social and emotional capacities.² So **investing early in nurturing care for all children is essential** for their healthy growth, development and wellbeing, providing solid foundations early in life, for the benefit of individuals and societies. Public investment in early childhood is one of the most visionary and effective policy measures that governments can take to break the cycle of disadvantage from children's early years. The **European Child Guarantee** is a key instrument to help make this a reality.

Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion, Conclusions of the Council of the European Union (2018)

'The early years of a child's development are critical in shaping children's health, learning, behaviour, social inclusion and they influence their entire life course. In this context, early childhood development policies and services are among the key tools for preventing and tackling poverty and social exclusion, breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and promoting social mobility.'

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

Article 24: Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being.

Child poverty and children's rights

- ❖ **The European Parliament must maintain and increase the EU's commitment to children's rights and to tackling child poverty and exclusion in Europe and globally, from children's earliest years.** It must support a **more ambitious EU target on child poverty reduction**, in line with Member States' commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals to halve poverty, in all its dimensions, by 2030. According to the latest Eurostat data, child poverty in the EU increased from 24% to 24.4% from 2020 to 2021. Compared to 2020, increases have been noted in 17 countries, with the effects of Covid-19 and the rising cost of living and energy prices leaving many families struggling to provide nurturing care for their children. Ending child poverty should be a priority for all European political groups. This must include public investment in children's first years, with support to families with infants and young children, special attention to children under three and to those facing particular disadvantage and exclusion.
- ❖ **The European Parliament must continue to uphold and promote the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.** The Strategy provides a strong framework for Member States to increase public investment and support for the youngest children and empower and strengthen vulnerable families and communities. For the Strategy to achieve its goals, it must catalyse greater commitment to invest in early childhood as the foundation for optimum health, growth, and development.

Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union

The EU 'shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of the rights of the child.'

¹ *The First 1001 Days. An age of opportunity. Evidence Brief 1* Parent-Infant Foundation First 1001 Days Movement

² *In brief: The science of early childhood development*, Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

A stronger social Europe

- ❖ **The European Parliament must continue to support and strengthen a Europe based on solidarity, dignity and non-discrimination for all young children and their families.** All children, including children living in extreme poverty, Roma and Traveller children, children in (or at risk of entering) alternative care, migrant and refugee children (including those who are undocumented) and children with disabilities should have nurturing care from the start, and access to quality essential services including quality early childhood education and care, social protection, safe and secure housing and access to maternal and child healthcare. Specific and targeted interventions are needed to reach the most marginalised young children and their families.
- ❖ **The European Parliament should continue to support the implementation of the Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030.** This must include an emphasis on the provision of early childhood education and care services that are of high quality, provided in a safe, nurturing and caring environment, and are accessible to all children including children under the age of three and those facing poverty, exclusion and disadvantage. **The quality of ECEC provision is highly dependent on the professionalism, competence and commitment of staff working in the sector** - it is therefore particularly important that there is continued support for staff training and development, more recognition of their essential role and enabling working conditions.
- ❖ **The European Parliament must continue to support and promote a social Europe based on the EU Pillar of Social Rights, with increased ambition on the target to fight child poverty** given that 19.8 million children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU in 2021. Investing in Europe starts by investing in children, families and communities, from conception, through infancy and children's first years of life. This is crucial to achieve social cohesion and inclusion, alongside growth and prosperity - now and in the longer term. The European Pillar of Social Rights, namely Article 11 on childcare and support to children, should seek to reinforce Member States' existing commitments to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights treaties.

The European Child Guarantee

- ❖ **The European Parliament must continue to support the successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee as an EU priority, with more support for, and public investment in, services that support the healthy development of children up to primary school entry, particularly for those under three years of age and facing poverty, disadvantage and discrimination.** The Child Guarantee asks Member States to have the best interest of the child as a primary consideration, and to provide an enabling policy environment which comprehensively addresses child poverty and social exclusion. This requires an ecosystem of policies and support measures to ensure that all children can have the best start in life – including social protection, work-life balance and employment policies, adequate minimum income, affordable housing, opportunities for early learning and access to quality care, parenting and family support, and universal access to health nutrition and healthcare.

First Years, First Priority is a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA. We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe.

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