

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

***First Years, First Priority Manifesto 2024***

Ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, the *First Years, First Priority* campaign is calling on all parties and candidates to support a strong social Europe that protects and promotes the rights of all children from their youngest years.

The new European Parliament and European Commission, with EU Member States, must strengthen efforts to end child poverty and social exclusion and discrimination, and ensure the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the European Child Guarantee and the Barcelona targets for early childhood education and care.

Members of the *First Years, First Priority* campaign have identified **6 priorities** for the next European Parliament mandate and the next European Commission work programme.

**1. End child poverty and social exclusion**

We need ambitious targets and more public investment to end child poverty and social exclusion, from children's earliest years. This requires the full implementation of the European Child Guarantee, with access to essential services for all children in need, and their families, from infancy and early childhood. This must include support to families with infants and young children, special attention to children under three and those facing exclusion, disadvantage and discrimination.

**2. Increase public investment in early childhood development**

We need more public investment in quality services and support that enable all children to receive nurturing care from infancy and early childhood. This requires integrated services available to all families and carers with young children, especially those facing particular vulnerabilities, discrimination and social exclusion. Integrated services must include social protection, early intervention, home visiting services and parenting support, early years health checks, access to safe and secure housing, universal access to maternal, newborn and child healthcare and quality early childhood education and care. Investing early in nurturing care for all children in need is essential for their healthy growth, development and wellbeing, and to fight child poverty.

### **3. Uphold children's rights through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

We need increased action to uphold and promote children's rights across the European Union and beyond. The EU must be guided by, and consistent with, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a renewed and strengthened EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which recognize that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.

### **4. End discrimination and social exclusion from early childhood**

We need strengthened commitment and action for a Europe based on solidarity, dignity and non-discrimination for all children, from their earliest years. 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 and access to quality essential services, from the start.

### **5. Provide quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for all children**

We need access to quality ECEC for all children and families, including children under the age of three and those facing poverty and exclusion. This requires the implementation of the revised Barcelona targets for 2030, with public investment in inclusive, high-quality ECEC services for all children, and in a professional, supported and valued staff that can provide a safe, nurturing and stimulating learning environment.

### **6. Take urgent action on climate change**

We need urgent European action to mitigate and adapt to the climate change crisis. Mitigation and adaptation efforts must consider the particular vulnerabilities and needs of very young children and their families and of pregnant women and infants, especially those already living in poverty and insecure housing or who are homeless, and who face greater risks in extreme heat, flooding and other extreme weather events.

*We are calling for:*

- ❖ Permanent mandates for the European Parliament Coordinator on Children’s Rights and the European Commission Coordinator on the Rights of the Child – at Vice-President level
- ❖ A renewed European Parliament Working Group on the Child Guarantee, that also ensures that early childhood is a key focus of implementation
- ❖ An integrated, cross-sector Working Group on early childhood development, in the European Commission, and the continuation of the European Commission Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care
- ❖ A re-established Children’s Rights intergroup in the European Parliament that promotes the rights of all children, from early childhood
- ❖ A European Year of Early Childhood

Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) co-lead the campaign *First Years, First Priority, A Fair Start for Every Child* 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 campaign works with civil society partners in 11 countries across Europe – France, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Finland, Serbia and Slovakia.

The Roma Education Fund (REF) and the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) are associate partners in the campaign.