Publication

International Summit on the Teaching Profession

Quality early childhood education: the key to prosperity and well-being

OECD
BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

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Foreword

From vision to action in education reform

In March 2025, the Ministry of Education and Children in Iceland, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and Education International will bring together education ministers, union leaders and other teacher leaders for the International Summit on the Teaching Profession (ISTP). The aim is to better support the teaching profession in meeting the formidable challenges of 21st century education.

One of the secrets of the success of the ISTP is that it explores difficult and controversial issues on the basis of sound evidence, provided by the OECD as the global leader for internationally comparative data and analysis. This report provides the background for the Summit, with a focus on education in the early years, which was one of the priorities set by the Ministry of Education and Children for the 2025 Summit.

The 2025 Summit takes place at a time when the gap between what education systems deliver and what economies demand is widening in many parts of the world. This will have dramatic consequences over the decades to come, as our students today will shape our economy, society and democracy of tomorrow.

Governments are under pressure to deliver results while ensuring that citizens' taxes are spent wisely and effectively. They set ambitious reform agendas and develop strategic plans to achieve them. But in my conversations with education ministers around the world, the main challenge they face isn't deciding what reforms to make but figuring out how to implement them successfully and sustainably. To transform education at scale, a vision of what is needed and knowledge of what is possible are not enough. It also takes smart strategies to make educational change happen, but this knowledge is only as valuable as our capacity to act upon it. This is where the International Summit on the Teaching Profession can make a difference because it brings together the actors that can affect change both at the system level and in the classroom.

Public policy faces tough choices when evaluating policy alternatives. It needs to weigh the potential impact against the economic and political cost of reform, keeping in mind that the costs for reform are usually short-term and certain, while any benefits will be long-term and uncertain. Should countries pursue what is most technically feasible? What is most politically and socially acceptable? What can be implemented quickly? What can be sustained over a sufficient time horizon and across electoral cycles?

Reforms often fail when the challenges of transformation are treated merely as technical issues. Technical issues have known solutions, which can be resolved within the structures and mechanisms of current education systems. Transformational issues can only be addressed through changes in priorities, beliefs and behaviour. This is much harder to achieve, because education systems tend to be a complex maze of stakeholders. The laws, regulations, structures and institutions on which policymakers tend to focus are just like the small visible tip of a huge iceberg rather than the larger invisible part under the waterline – the school systems.

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This invisible part is about the beliefs, capacities, motivations and fears of the stakeholders who are involved in education—teachers and parents included. This is where collisions occur, because this part of the education system often tends to evade the radar screen of public policy. That is why educational leaders are rarely successful with reform unless they build a shared understanding and collective ownership for change, and unless they build capacity and create the right policy climate, with accountability measures designed to encourage innovation rather than compliance. This is where the "why" of reform comes in.

In fact, most successful educational reforms started with a compelling 'why', the purpose and cause of reform. They inspired the education system to act through this 'why', and they used the 'what' of the reform, the specific actions and processes, as the tangible outcome of that 'why'. By inspiring educators and administrators with the ideas underpinning the reform, educational leaders gave them a sense of purpose or belonging that is not solely linked to external incentives. For those who are inspired, the motivation to act is always deeply personal and thus sustainable beyond the short term. Great school systems become great because people inside feel they belong. People across all cultures share the very basic need of belonging, which arises when people share values and beliefs. Where policymakers are able to clearly communicate the 'why' of educational reform, and where educators buy into the value proposition of these reforms, they will often go the extra mile to implement those reforms even when they encounter difficulties.

At the beginning, ideas are fuelled by passion that drives people to make sacrifices so that a cause bigger than themselves can be born. However, most countries have seen pilots and programmes, even very successful ones, that struggle to scale up. Countless initiatives that were highly successful when they were small never made the grade at the national level. It is always culture that scales, and culture is one of the hallmarks of effective leadership. This often comes about due to close collaboration between policymakers and teacher organisations. Culture is about system learning, system-wide innovation, and purposeful collaboration that leads to large-scale and ongoing improvement. We have succeeded as a human species because of our ability to form shared cultures. Building shared cultures – inspiring people to come together around shared values and beliefs – is also our best bet for effective reform implementation.

It is equally important to detect the formal and informal exercise of power of individuals and stakeholder groups within the education system, and to understand the commitments, loyalties, beliefs and fears of each stakeholder and how these affect their decisions. One should never underestimate how much stakeholders may perceive a reform as a threat to them and their values, even if it is only their desire to maintain what is familiar, stable and predictable in their work and life. One of the key challenges is that the benefits of reform are often thinly spread. As a result, it is easier to mobilise opposition to reform, rather than garner stakeholder support.

Policymakers need to forge alliances with people who will support the reform, to integrate and defuse opposition, and to give valuable dissenting voices a role to adjust perspectives and implementation processes. Again, this is what the International Summit on the Teaching Profession is about. By understanding the core values of stakeholders, it is often possible to align their interests with the goals of the reform, reducing opposition. Successful reform therefore requires the ability to recognise potential losses to different stakeholders and predictable defensive responses to those losses at the individual and systemic level. The potential loss of advantages or privileged positions is of particular importance in education reform, because the vast structure of established providers means that there are extensive vested interests. As a result, the status quo has many protectors – stakeholders in education who stand or perceive to lose a degree of power or influence if changes are made. It is equally important to understand the network of alliances each stakeholder is embedded in. Policymakers are likely to encounter hidden alliances between different stakeholder groups that can facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of reform.

An understanding of these connections, and the relationships beyond organisational charts, can help identify ways to leverage supportive alliances and mediate opposing ones.

Policymakers need to prepare stakeholders for the disequilibrium the reform will introduce in the system, and closely watch for signals on how much heat the system can stand. By engaging with the resisters, policymakers acknowledge the sacrifices they are asking them to make and how difficult these may be for them. In the same vein, it is essential to understand the true degree of resources, power and influence each stakeholder has over success and failure of the reform; and how much the stakeholder actually cares about the reform and its outcome.

Often there is also uncertainty about costs, because the education infrastructure is large and involves multiple levels of government, each often trying to minimise or shift its own costs for the reform. Assessing the relative costs and benefits of reform in education is also difficult because of the large number of intervening factors that can influence the nature, size and distribution of any improvements. The investment may be expensive over the long term, while in the short term it is often difficult to predict clear, identifiable results from new policies, especially given the time lags between implementation and effect.

Timing is also relevant to education reform, and in more than one sense. Most significantly, there is a substantial gap between the time at which the initial cost of reform is incurred, and the time when it becomes evident whether the benefits of reform will make themselves felt. While timing complicates the politics of reform in many domains, it seems to have a greater impact on education reform, where the lags often involve many years. Education reform becomes a thankless task when elections take place before the benefits of reform are realised. Policymakers may lose an election over education issues, but they rarely win an election because of education reform.

Sometimes crises can facilitate reform. When nothing is certain, anything becomes possible. In crisis conditions, change is often the only available choice. Moreover, social acceptance for change is usually much greater in crisis conditions. In normal times, when digital technologies were seen as an addition or as an extra in education, there were often many reasons to resist their introduction. During the pandemic, these technologies became the lifeline for education and the discussions shifted from the "if" to the "how" of their use. Shocks that can leverage change are not confined to events that suddenly disrupt the ability of educational institutions to function, they can also be events that alter perceptions of the education system. For example, the view of employers that educational qualifications are no longer relevant can lead to hiring practices on the basis of alternative criteria and thus devalue established educational pathways.

It is important for governments to strive for ambitious outcomes that can take a longer time to deliver. But they also need to deliver tangible results in the short and medium-term to keep stakeholders engaged. As important as it is to design reforms to scale across space, it is equally important to carefully craft their trajectory over time. Few educational reforms start out with conceptualising the entire trajectory of reform, i.e. the entire sequence of steps, their interrelationships, and their short-term, intermediate and long-term outcomes. The effect is often a piece-meal approach, which can result in layers over layers of incoherent reforms.

Communicating short-, medium- and long-term outcomes will help build ownership for reform implementation and sustain efforts and resources over sufficiently long periods. This requires honesty about the length of the reform cycle. Even if it were possible to change early childhood education overnight, it would take many years for the outcomes to translate into improved learning in school and better labour-market outcomes in life. Radical and erratic changes in education rarely lead to improvements, but rather cause reform fatigue. Progress tends to be radical over time when it is incremental, consistent and coherent in time. Helping stakeholders in the system to reach the periphery of their comfort zone in the short-term often leads to more

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sustainable change. The challenge is to keep the temperature within the productive zone of disequilibrium and to anticipate and counteract tactics that people will use to lower the heat to more comfortable levels.

Clear trajectories help to monitor and understand progress in the education system, but they also enable an informed discussion on the questions that are central to successful reform implementation: What is the reform trying to achieve? How will it achieve this? How will the system know whether the reform implementation is on track? And if implementation is off-track, what should be done about it? Where stakeholders and the public do not see the entire trajectory, with clear perspectives of when specific outcomes are expected to materialise, it is harder to sustain effort over long periods. It also becomes easy for subsequent governments to criticise reforms, by pointing to the lack of immediate outcomes, even if those results were only intended to be achieved in the medium or long term.

Finally, an important aspect of effective policy implementation is the ability to look not just forward but also outwards. It is not surprising that a strong and consistent effort to carry out international benchmarking, and to incorporate the results of that benchmarking into policy and practice, is a common characteristic of the most rapidly improving education systems. And the faster the context and thus the demands on education evolve, the harder it becomes to just borrow on past experience. In the past, it was a relatively safe bet for policymakers to follow their predecessors, because these knew the world quite well, and the world changed slowly. But in a fast-changing world, it becomes much harder to distinguish between timeless wisdom and outdated bias. The International Summit on the Teaching Profession is helping policymakers and union leaders look outward in deliberate ways, and this has never been more important than today. The world has become indifferent to tradition and past reputations, unforgiving of frailty and ignorant of custom or practice. Success will go to those individuals, institutions and countries which are swift to adapt, slow to complain and open to change. The task for governments and union leaders is to help educators rise to this challenge.

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Start strong or risk falling behind

Starting behind in the early years often means staying behind. The trajectory of a child's development in the first few years is a powerful predictor of their future success in education, work and well-being. So, for a government seeking to attain a more equitable and inclusive society, the significance of early childhood education and care (ECEC) cannot be overlooked.

Countries that invest resources and efforts to develop strong ECEC tend to see better educational outcomes and greater social equity. Yet, on average, governments in OECD countries spent just 0.8% of their GDP on ECEC in 2021, with large variations across nations. Public expenditure on ECEC is higher than 1.0% of GDP in several countries including the Nordic ones – with total spending reaching as high as 1.8% in Iceland and 1.7% in Norway[1] – but considerably lower in other places.

Why aren't countries doing more to ensure high-quality early childhood education when it yields substantial returns? Investment in ECEC is not just a financial commitment but a strategic one, aimed at levelling the playing field from the earliest stages of life. The transformative power of high-quality ECEC can shape the future of our youngest citizens and, by extension, our societies.

Children who attend high-quality early education programmes are more likely to succeed in school, attain higher levels of education and secure better jobs. This, in turn, contributes to a more skilled and productive workforce, driving economic growth and reducing social inequalities.

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The critical early years

Failing to develop core foundational skills in the early years can lead to significant struggles in school. This can increase the likelihood of social and behavioural difficulties in adolescence and adulthood. On top of this, addressing a poor start at older ages is complex, challenging and costly, with limited success rates[2]. At a systemic level, the proportion of children with poor early development constrains the overall performance of an education system, limiting its ability to achieve success for all students.

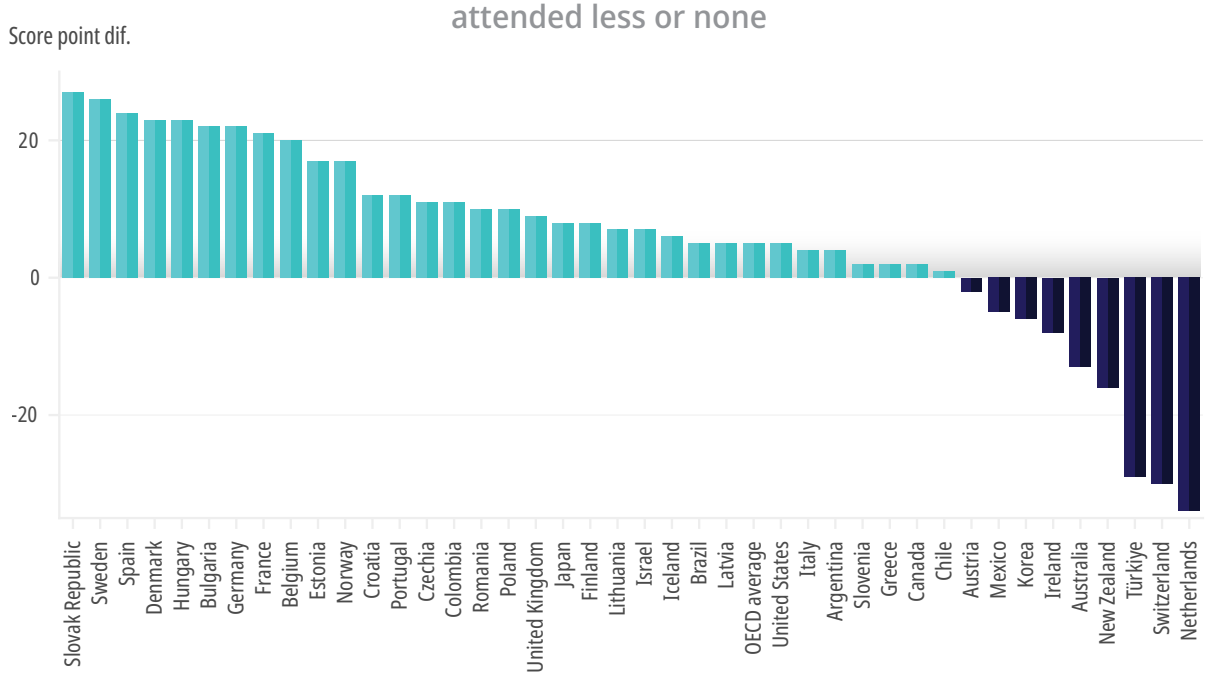
In 2022, the enrolment of children in education at age 5 was almost universal in most OECD countries. Enrolment rates for children aged 3 to 5 in ECEC was also high in many OECD countries, exceeding 90% in some places. However, disparities persist, particularly for children under the age of three, with some significantly lower rates.

The impact of ECEC is profound. For example, a meta-analysis of 22 high-quality experiments of several United States ECEC programmes found that participation leads to reductions in special education placement and grade repetition, while increasing high school graduation rates. Other studies have shown that young children in the United States who participated in ECEC demonstrated higher emergent literacy skills and much higher emergent numeracy skills than children who never attended early care settings, regardless of their socio-economic background. The evidence demonstrates the importance of addressing gaps in ECEC for fostering inclusivity. All children, regardless of their background, should have access to the same opportunities.

In an impatient world looking for quick solutions, it is perhaps understandable why ECEC is not prioritised. However, the social benefits of high-quality early education are clear, fostering social cohesion and reducing the likelihood of future social problems. For policymakers wanting to make a real positive difference, it is an area worth focusing on.

Figure 1. Students who attended ECEC tend to score higher in maths at age 15

PISA 2022 score-point differences in mathematics for 15-year-old students who attended more than two years of ECEC and those who attended less or none



Notes: Only OECD member and accession countries with available data are shown. Socio-economic background, measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status, is controlled. OECD average: Arithmetic mean across all OECD member countries.

Source: OECD (n.d.), PISA 2022 databases, https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa/pisa-data.html

Predicting adult outcomes from the early years

One argument against early years investment has been that early skills fade out in primary school. However, the benefit of positive early learning, even if it is not fully visible in primary schools, re-emerges later in schooling and persists into adulthood. According to an OECD study[3], children's test scores at the age of five better predict adult outcomes than those in primary school.

This finding may sound surprising. However, strong early learning appears to act as a foundation that, once consolidated during early schooling, supports further skill development throughout education, adolescence and adulthood. In contrast, children who miss out on developing critical early skills, such as emergent literacy or self-regulation, face significant hurdles in achieving academic success and positive adult outcomes.

Early learning and well-being also influence a wide range of interrelated outcomes in later life. For example, higher educational achievement and attainment are often linked to better employment prospects, higher earnings, and improved mental and physical health. The impact of early learning on adult outcomes is substantial.

Early academic skills, such as emergent literacy and numeracy, are positively associated with later educational achievement. Self-regulation, visual-motor skills and agreeableness in early childhood also predict later educational attainment. These early skills are evident in the abilities students demonstrate at the end of primary and secondary school, including higher rates of school completion.

This is because strong early learning translates into higher skill levels at later ages, the "skills beget skills" process. Early progress allows children to capitalise on further learning opportunities, both inside and outside school. Children with strong early learning outcomes also attract additional learning opportunities from parents, teachers and their environment. This is because they are more likely to ask questions or engage in new activities.

There is also a socio-economic factor to consider. In line with many other studies, the OECD International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) found that socio-economically disadvantaged 5-year-old children had both lower early cognitive skills and social and emotional skills than advantaged children.

This, again, points to the significant long-term benefits linked to investing in early childhood education and improving inclusion. By providing a strong foundation in the early years, we can ensure that all children can thrive in adulthood, not just the advantaged ones.[4]

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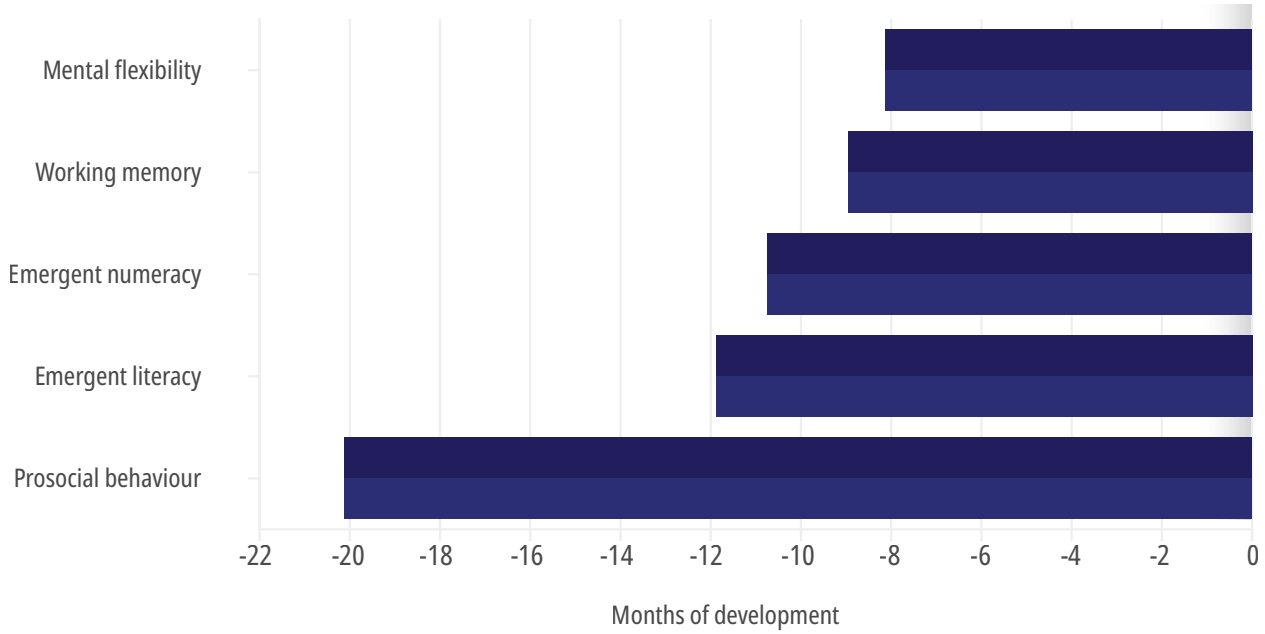
Figure 2. Disadvantaged children face significant development gaps by age five

Development differences between disadvantaged and advantaged children, in months



Source: OECD (2020), *Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3990407f-en. Figure 4.6. Social-emotional scores, by socio-economic status

Did you know?

There are substantial socio-economic gaps in ECEC participation in most countries, especially for children aged 0 to 2.

Bridging the socio-economic gap

A robust body of evidence documents inequalities in multiple areas of early development by children's family backgrounds. By the age of five, disadvantaged children are already on average 12 months behind their more advantaged peers in terms of pro-social behaviour and literacy development, according to evidence from the OECD's International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study. This is a substantial gap for any five-year-old to close, and most will not be able to do so without intervention.

That is one of the reasons why ECEC programmes can make such a difference. They are instrumental to narrowing the disparities in academic performance across socio-economic classes, and between rural and urban populations. By providing a strong foundation for learning, these programmes help level the playing field, ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have the chance to succeed academically. This, in turn, strengthens social cohesion among children, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society.

However, despite significant strides in expanding ECEC participation, gaps based on socio-economic backgrounds persist. Internationally comparative data on ECEC participation by children's socio-economic backgrounds are limited, but available evidence shows that these gaps remain a stubborn challenge.

Vulnerable children missing out

Vulnerable children are still more likely to miss out on quality ECEC, according to OECD data. Cultural barriers and a lack of information limit enrolment, while some families simply cannot afford it. The data show that vulnerable children are most affected, with substantial socio-economic gaps in ECEC participation in most countries, especially for children aged 0 to 2. Alarmingly, in 8 out of 28 OECD countries, these gaps have widened for children aged 3 to 5.

This trend underscores the uneven progress in bridging socio-economic divides. Concerningly, disadvantaged children often receive lower-quality ECEC services. Evidence suggests that the overall quality of services is only improving in a handful of places. This is an issue as investing in high-quality ECEC is a cost-effective strategy to significantly enhance children's cognitive, social and emotional growth. These positive effects are particularly pronounced for vulnerable children, who stand to gain the most from early educational interventions.

The benefits of high-quality ECEC

Children who attend high-quality early education are more likely to succeed in school, attain higher levels of education, and secure better jobs. This, in turn, contributes to a more skilled and productive workforce, driving economic growth and reducing social inequalities.

The social benefits are profound and extend beyond children. For example, one significant advantage is the increased engagement of parents, particularly women, in the labour market. By providing reliable and high-quality care for their children, ECEC programmes enable parents to pursue employment opportunities, contributing to economic growth and stability. This increased labour market participation benefits children as it lowers the risk of them falling into poverty. It also promotes gender equality by allowing more women to balance work and family responsibilities.

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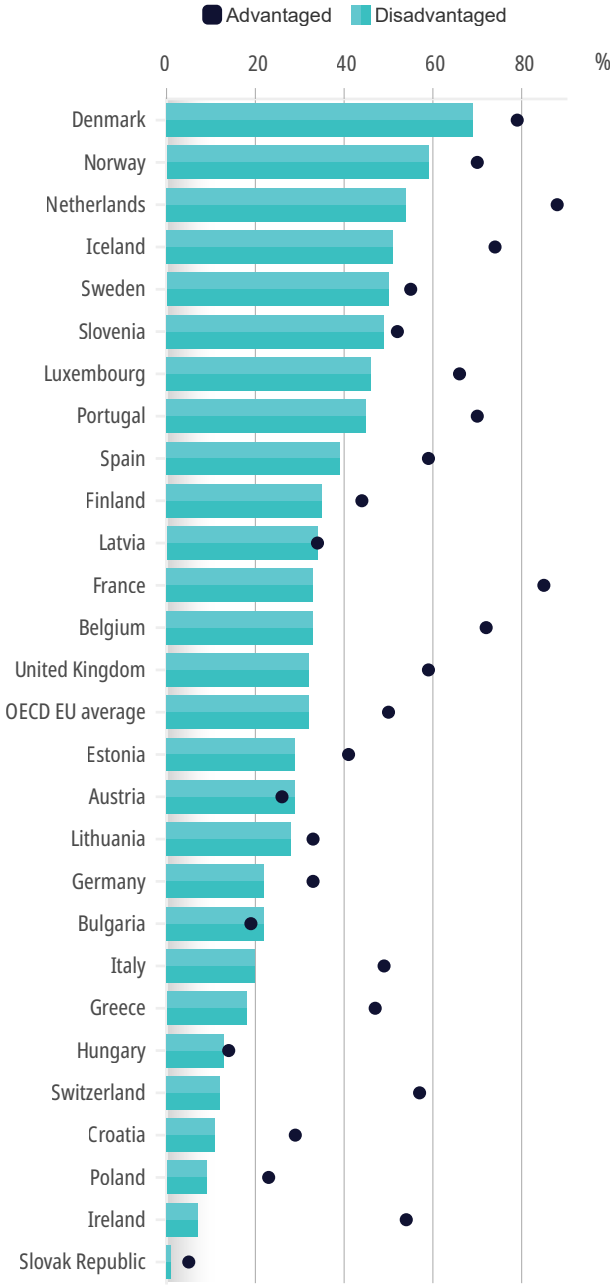
Figure 3. Socio-economic inequalities in early childhood education and care participation

Children aged 2 or younger, 2022



Notes: Data for Iceland and United Kingdom refer to 2018, for Norway to 2020 and for Switzerland to 2021. Data are OECD estimates based on information from EU SILC. Data refer to children using centre-based services, organised family day care, and care services provided by (paid) professional childminders. Disadvantaged and advantaged children are defined as the bottom third and top third on the equivalised disposable household income, respectively.

Source: OECD Family Database (2022), "PF3.2 Enrolment in childcare and pre-school", https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm. For more information see Source section and Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en).

A roadmap to reducing inequalities by investing in ECEC

The OECD has responded to the pressing need for reducing inequalities from the early years by creating a comprehensive policy roadmap, outlined in the report "Reducing Inequalities by Investing in Early Childhood Education and Care.[5]" While there are numerous factors to consider, two stand out as particularly crucial.

First, it is important to combine universal and targeted policy approaches. This means creating policies that reach everyone but are specifically designed to support the most disadvantaged. Additional support is essential for children living in poverty, those with special needs, language barriers or other challenges. Policymakers should prioritise cost-effective measures such as evidence-based curriculums, high-quality staff training and targeted funding allocations. Vulnerable children should also benefit from specialised staff and subsidies for low-income families, ensuring they receive the support they need to thrive.

Second, a cross-sectoral approach is vital. Fragmented early years services can complicate access for families, making it harder for them to benefit from available resources. Governments need to integrate early education, health and social services with common goals to ensure that investments in ECEC have a lasting impact on vulnerable children. The role of parents is also critical; ECEC programmes must work in partnership with parents, providing them with information and resources to support their children's learning at home.

The stakes are undeniably high. Currently, children are born with varying opportunities to develop and learn, leading to lifelong inequalities. By creating high-quality ECEC at scale, we can build a foundation for a more equitable and inclusive society, where every child has the opportunity to thrive. It is time for governments, educators, and communities to come together and take a more comprehensive approach to early years policies to better support children and families.

Three key policies for a high-quality ECEC workforce

Three main policy areas are pivotal to attracting, maintaining and retaining a high-quality ECEC workforce:

Skills Development: Policies encompassing initial preparation programmes, in-service training and opportunities for informal learning are essential. These initiatives attract new entrants to the profession and provide ongoing opportunities for skill upgrading and career progression.

Working Conditions: Improving salaries, contract status and the organisation of work can sustain a positive workplace climate, reduce stress and increase job satisfaction. These measures are crucial for retaining highly skilled and motivated professionals.

Leadership and Management: Effective leadership in ECEC creates opportunities for staff development and improves working conditions. Leadership roles can also serve as an attractive career progression path for staff seeking more responsibilities.

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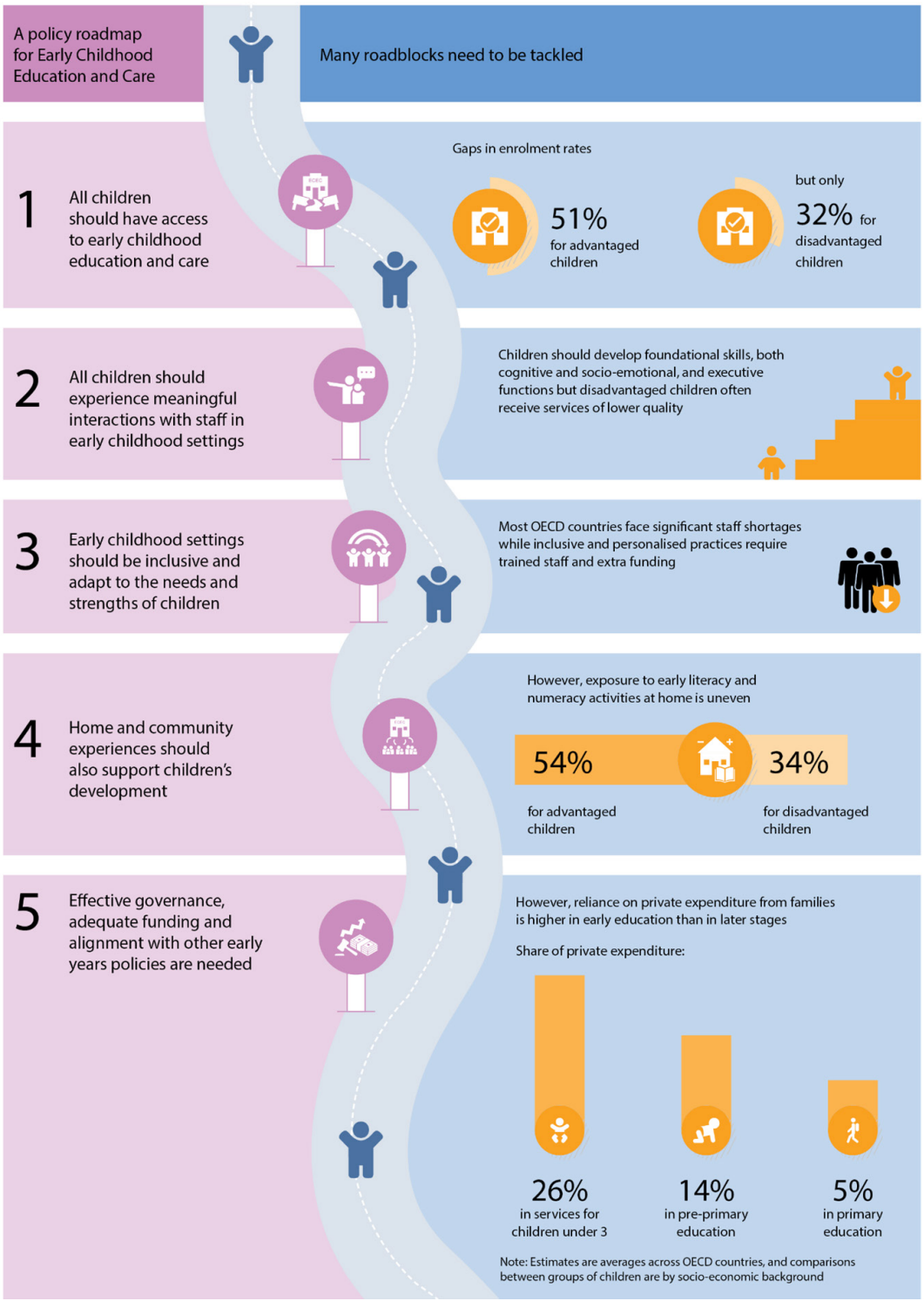
Figure 4. Roadmap to reducing ECEC inequalities



Note: Differences between categories are all statistically significant (see *PISA Results Volume II* Annex A3).

Source: OECD (2023[16]), PISA 2022 Database, Volume II Annex B1, Chapter 5 (Figure II.5.14).

Strengthening the ECEC workforce

Staff play a critical role in shaping equitable and high-quality early learning environments. That is why attracting, retaining and developing strong ECEC professionals is essential. This goal is particularly true if policymakers want to expand provision to a wider range of children and underserved areas.

At the moment, however, the ECEC workforce faces several critical challenges. High turnover rates are a significant issue, often driven by low wages and inadequate benefits, which fail to reflect the demanding nature of the work. This instability can be compounded by the lack of professional development opportunities and career advancement pathways, leading to burnout and job dissatisfaction. The sector also struggles with recruitment, as the perception of ECEC as a low-status profession deters potential candidates.

Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies, including better compensation, enhanced training programmes and policies that elevate the status of ECEC professionals. Strengthening the quality of the workforce will also help mitigate indirect barriers to ECEC participation, such as a lack of trust in services.

Policymakers should aim to achieve a better match of staff. This would help meet the diverse needs of children, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special education needs. A more diverse and well-trained ECEC workforce would also ensure that all children, regardless of their background, feel secure and supported.

Staff confidence levels

Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to perform tasks effectively, is a key factor in reducing stress and achieving better outcomes. The TALIS Starting Strong 2018 survey showed that, on average, ECEC staff have high levels of self-efficacy in supporting children's development, learning and well-being[vi]. However, confidence levels dropped when it came to working with a diversity of children. For example, only 20% of staff, on average, felt highly confident in supporting the development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Supporting teaching practices

To respond to this, informal learning through collaborative activities and knowledge sharing within teams can support staff self-efficacy, competencies and expertise. On average, between one-half and two-thirds of pre-primary staff across countries reported engaging in either daily or weekly discussions with colleagues about various topics, according to TALIS Starting Strong 2018. These discussions often revolved around approaches to children's development, well-being and learning; the needs of specific children; planned activities; and methods for evaluating children.

Engaging in joint activities across different groups of children, exchanging pedagogical materials with peers, and providing feedback to colleagues about their practice were relatively less frequent but still significant. Four in ten staff across countries reported participating in these activities on a daily or weekly basis.

Data also point to the frequency with which ECEC leaders engage in tasks to support teaching practices development. Observing staff practices and interactions with children, providing feedback based on these observations, and collaborating with staff to improve how children play together were the three most frequent activities reported on a daily and weekly basis. ECEC leadership also needs to be developed. By creating opportunities for staff professional development and improving working conditions, ECEC leaders can help retain skilled staff in the sector.

Figure 5. Self-efficacy of early childhood education and care staff, pre-primary education

Percentage of staff who feel that that they can do the following "a lot" in their work with children

Working with a diversity of children

	Chile	Germany*	Iceland	Israel	Japan	Korea	Norway	Türkiye	Denmark**	Average
Support the development of disadvantaged children	36	9	20	33	2	6	17	34	20	20
Adapt your work to the individual child	41	20	36	47	4	19	23	49	34	30
Stimulate interest in cultural differences and commonalities	34	10	18	28	1	12	19	43	19	21

Supporting children's development, learning and well-being

	Chile	Germany*	Iceland	Israel	Japan	Korea	Norway	Türkiye	Denmark**	Average
Help children to interact and show good social behaviour	71	60	62	65	6	43	55	75	74	57
Calm a child who is upset	61	54	67	64	10	39	59	67	83	56
Provide all children with a feeling of security	66	61	70	74	15	40	73	78	77	62
Help children to develop self-confidence	70	42	49	56	10	42	42	76	63	50
Help children develop creativity and problem solving	61	31	39	53	5	33	32	71	45	41
Help children develop their capacity to learn independently	47	32	32	45	4	23	24	55	44	34
Monitor and observe children's development	61	24	44	49	8	33	44	73	58	44

Other aspects of self-efficacy

	Chile	Germany*	Iceland	Israel	Japan	Korea	Norway	Türkiye	Denmark**	Average
Help children prepare for starting school	46	26	26	36	4	18	21	60	29	30
Use digital technology to support learning	26	1	12	22	0	15	9	39	8	15

Notes: Within each country, areas for which the largest percentages of staff report high levels of self-efficacy are indicated in dark blue and those for which the smallest percentages of staff report high levels of self-efficacy are indicated in white with intermediary colours used to indicate intermediate percentages.

Source: OECD (2019, TALIS Starting Strong 2018 Database, http://www.oecd.org/education/school/oecdtalisstartingstrongdata.htm, Table C.3.24.

The importance of engaging parents in ECEC

The role played by children's home learning environments is critical. However, few countries have systemic approaches to supporting parents to give their children the best possible start in life.

Some might consider this strange, as the day-to-day activities that parents undertake are highly correlated with children's learning and development[7]. Regardless of socio-economic background, an OECD study found children did better when their parents:

- Read to them almost every day
- Ensured there were many children's books in the home
- Had back-and-forth conversations with them
- Took them to special activities such as dance, swimming or scouts
- Were involved in the ECEC centre or school they attend.

At the same time, the study found that moderate engagement in most activities was more strongly associated with children's learning than daily frequency. For example, children who attended special activities three or four times a week had higher scores than children who attended such activities every day.

An exception was reading, where the findings show that reading five to seven days a week with children was more strongly correlated with children's emergent literacy and their social-emotional skills than reading to them less frequently. Nonetheless, reading to children three to four times a week was still associated with stronger skill development than reading to children once a week or not at all.

Socio-economic divides

Elsewhere, there is ample evidence that parents of low socio-economic status tend to spend less time on developmental activities with their children. According to research, in all countries, the percentage of children regularly exposed to early literacy and numeracy activities was higher if they had an advantaged socio-economic background[8].

Previous research suggested that parents of lower socio-economic status had different beliefs about child development. However, recent studies show that child performance differences are due to children in disadvantaged environments often having more limited resources and higher exposure to stress.

This emphasises the importance of quality ECEC, together with other support for parents. For children without strong home learning environments, early care and schooling may be their only chance to develop the key skills they need to succeed at school and in later life.

Developing ECEC programmes that help parents support their children's well-being and early learning can enhance children's positive experiences in ECEC. Policies that reduce parents' stress or fit easily into their routines seem promising. ECEC settings and staff play a crucial role in providing parents with information and support for home interactions with their children, coordinating with other professionals working with families, and engaging with schools to ease transitions, especially for vulnerable children.

Staff and leaders also need training in this area and support to work with other professionals, including time for tasks without children and salaries that reflect their roles. Not all ECEC staff need to take on extra tasks, but those who do should have their roles and status clearly recognised.

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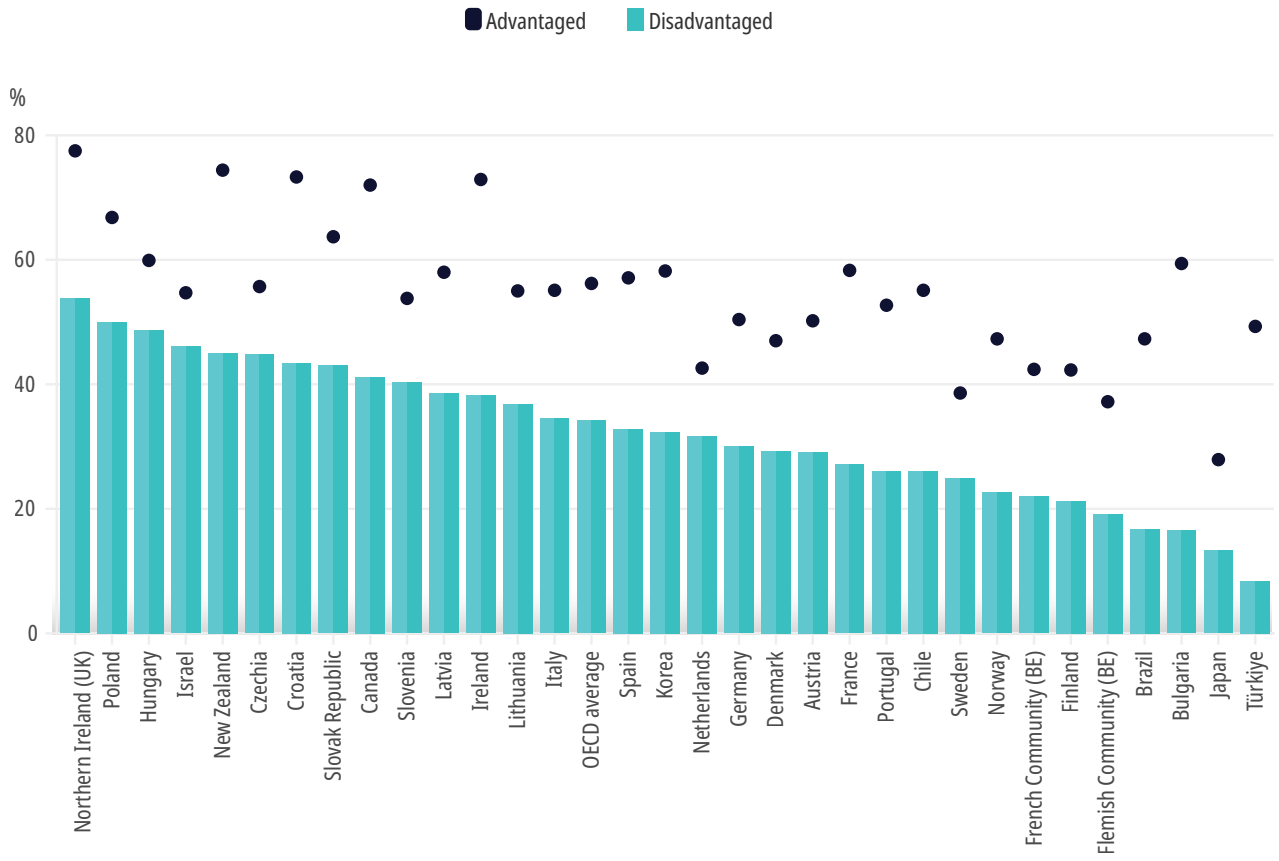
Figure 6. Socio-economic gap in home activities for early literacy and numeracy

Percentage of 10-year-old students whose parents reported doing early literacy and numeracy activities often



Notes: Data are from TIMSS 2019 except for Brazil, French Community of Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands and Slovenia. For these countries and jurisdictions, data are from PIRLS 2021. OECD average refers to the average across available OECD countries, excluding subnational jurisdictions.

Source: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (n.d.), TIMSS 2011 and 2019 databases, PIRLS 2011 and 2021 databases, https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/databases-landing.html (accessed on 13 June 2024).

Migration and other trends

One of the trends impacting ECEC is international migration. The rise in the number of migrants in many parts of the world is reshaping the demographic composition of child populations in ECEC. This trend, together with the expansion and greater accessibility of ECEC services, has led to increasing social and cultural diversity amongst the children participating in early education settings.

As language is a cornerstone of early development, the increase in multilingualism represents a distinctly meaningful dimension to diversity and creates challenges. While migration is not solely about language, it introduces a spectrum of cultural experiences that often diverge from mainstream norms in the host country. This diversity, though challenging, enriches the educational environment, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic learning space.

Despite the significance of multilingualism, robust comparative indicators for its impact on ECEC remain scarce. However, recent research analysis[9] provide illuminating insights. Between 2007 and 2015, the percentage of children who spoke two or more languages before starting primary school and who had attended ECEC programmes for at least two years increased in 14 out of 24 OECD member of accession countries with available data[10]. Notably, Austria, Canada, Ireland, Spain and New Zealand saw the share of multilingual children rise by four or more percentage points. By the mid-2010s, over one in five children in these systems were reported as multilingual.

This surge in multilingualism underscores the importance of supporting inclusion from the earliest years. Effective inclusive practices build on foundations that benefit all children, regardless of their background or development trajectory. Diversity should be valued and sustained across all settings within an ECEC system, and not only in settings serving large shares of disadvantaged or minority children.

It is important to build on the multilingual competencies of children, using multilingual materials, and working closely with parents to maintain their heritage languages. In highly diverse contexts where many languages are represented within ECEC settings, and where it is not reasonable to expect ECEC staff to speak these languages, this can also involve fostering language awareness and visibility, at least symbolically.

Continuous professional development is key to supporting ECEC staff and leaders in developing more inclusive practices. Transversal competencies and attitudes, such as addressing biases and valuing diversity are a foundation for more specific skills, such as supporting home languages.

In turn, system- and setting-level monitoring and assessment can help to better understand and identify children's needs and strengths. Monitoring also aids assessing the quality of supports provided to children, as a complement to the monitoring of more general aspects of quality in ECEC. This will help ensure that all children, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background, have access to high-quality early education.

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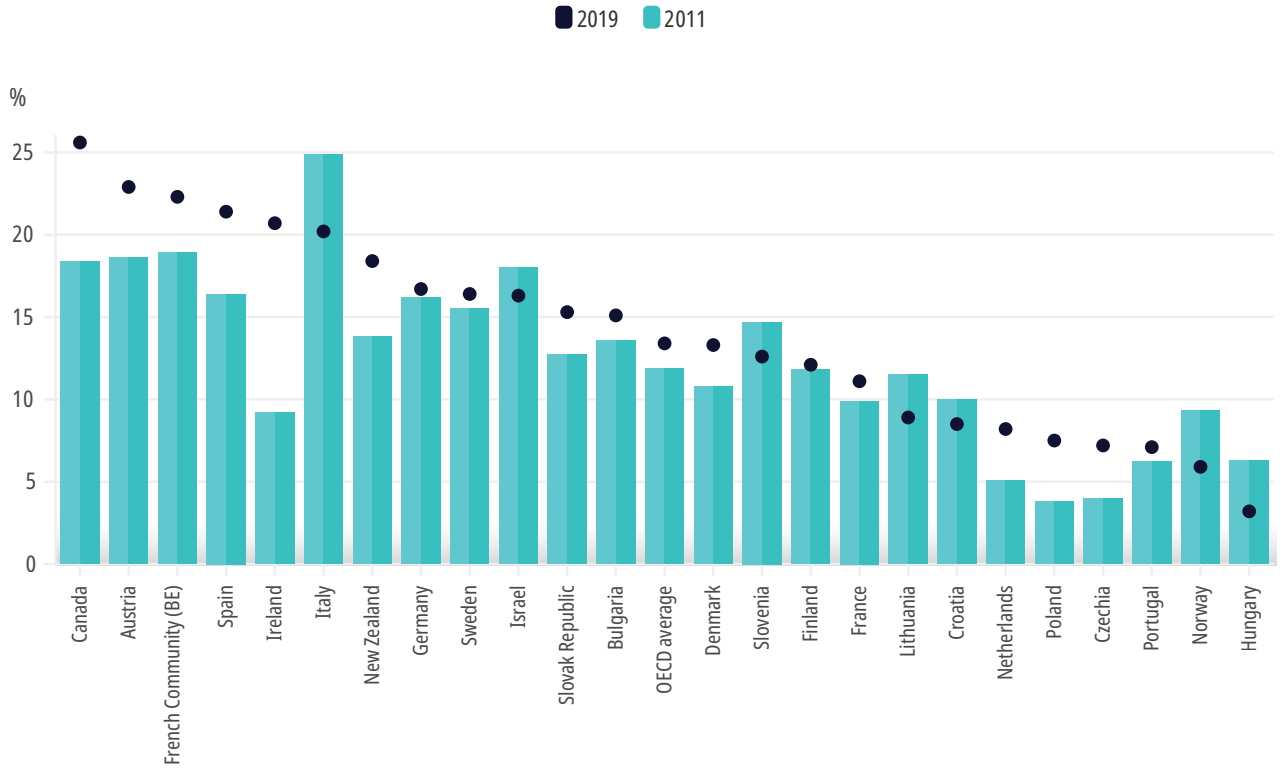
Figure 7. Linguistic diversity in ECEC settings on the rise

Percentage of 10-year-old children reported as being multilingual before primary school and having attended ECEC for more than two years



Note: Based on parental retrospective reports. OECD average refers to the average across available OECD countries, excluding subnational jurisdictions. Children were in 4th grade and 10 years old on average at the time of data collection.

Source: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (n.d.), TIMSS 2011 and 2019 databases, PIRLS 2011 and 2021 databases, https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/databases-landing.html (accessed on 13 June 2024).

Did you know?

In 2022, the enrolment of children in education at age five was almost universal in most OECD countries.

The power of play

For young children, play is not just a source of joy but a crucial element of their development and well-being. Play provides a unique opportunity for children to build social connections, learn negotiation skills and develop language abilities. It allows them to use their imaginations and create their own scenarios and stories, fostering creativity and cognitive growth; as well as ensuring they do physical activity.

However, there is evidence that children's playtime is decreasing. Factors like increased safety concerns, more screen time, and the rise in single parenthood are contributing to this trend. This trend is also more likely to impact children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

This is obviously concerning; even children themselves consistently recognise that play is important to them. According to research, 4 out of 10 five-year-olds stated that being able to play was the best part of being at their ECEC centre or pre-primary school[xi]. This preference for play surpassed any other activity identified by children in the study.

Children valued the opportunity to play with their friends, engaging in games like hide-and-seek, pretend play and board games. They also enjoyed playing with toys available at their centres, such as dolls and toy animals. Some children preferred outdoor play or activities involving sand, while a small proportion enjoyed playing alone.

Creativity was another cherished aspect of their ECEC experience. Many children loved making or creating things, with arts and crafts being particularly popular. Drawing was the favourite art activity of those who enjoy arts and crafts, followed by colouring, making crafts, painting and using modelling clay.

Almost all children (over 99%) had positive things to say about their ECEC centre or school, with fewer than 1% preferring to be at home, according to the study. This overwhelmingly positive perspective can be maintained if learning environments continue to meet children's needs and cater to their interests.

Interestingly, children's views on their early learning environments did not significantly differ between girls and boys or between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, children who enjoyed learning and had choices over their activities tended to have higher cognitive and social-emotional skills[xii].

Children who favoured learning as their favourite part of their ECEC experience had significantly higher early learning scores, particularly in emergent literacy and numeracy. Children who enjoyed their early learning experiences were also more likely to have a positive view of later schooling. Conversely, once children decided they did not like school, it was challenging to re-engage them fully[xiii].

Children learn and develop in many ways through play. By listening to children, educators can better provide positive learning environments that foster early skill development and well-being, supporting children's later engagement in school. ECEC curriculum frameworks should keep a well-rounded, play-based approach. At the same time, they should include chances for focused interactions that build specific skills suited to children's development stages.

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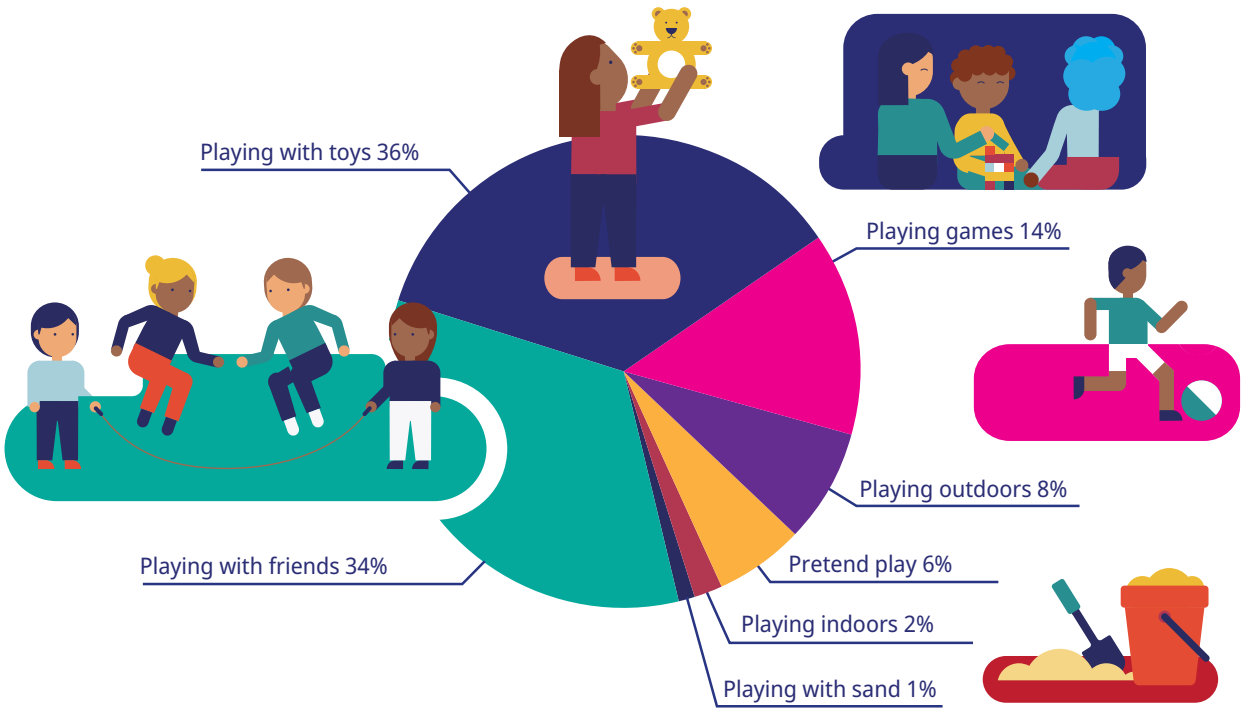
Figure 8. Children's favourite types of play



Source: OECD (2022), *Play, Create and Learn: What Matters Most for Five-Year-Olds.* OECD Publishing, Paris

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https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study.html	[3] [11] [12]
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Notes

This work has been authorised by Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD.

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International Summit on the Teaching Profession

Quality early childhood education: the key to prosperity and well-being

Governments must balance political and financial pressures while striving for lasting reforms that require cultural as well as technical change. Success hinges on building shared purpose, nurturing alliances, and managing power dynamics among stakeholders. Clear short-, medium- and long-term aims, alongside open communication, can secure support. Crises can accelerate acceptance, though election cycles pose obstacles to sustained progress. International benchmarking helps policymakers learn from successful systems. Ultimately, effective leadership fosters collaboration, innovation, and shared values, confronting vested interests to align education with a fast-changing world.