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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

The system-level indicators on early childhood education and care (ECEC) explore main aspects of the situation in Europe regarding the right to affordable ECEC of good quality for all children. These indicators focus on key policies in the areas of access, educational guidelines and staff in 38 European education systems.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to educational or developmental programmes (ISCED 0) as well as childcare services for children from birth to the start of compulsory primary education.

These indicators support the analysis in the [Education and Training Monitor](#), which is the European Commission's annual report on EU education and training systems.

1 Gap between childcare leave and place guarantee in ECEC

Ensuring access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a primary concern of national and European Union decision-makers when developing policies for young children and their parents. The [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) established the right to affordable ECEC of good quality for all children. However, this right is not yet enshrined in the legislation of many Member States.

In Europe, two main approaches exist for ensuring universal access to ECEC: legal entitlement and compulsory ECEC attendance. Under the legal entitlement, public authorities must offer a place for every child within the specified age range upon parental request. With compulsory ECEC, public authorities must provide enough places for all children within the age range mandated.

When addressing ECEC access, the duration of childcare leave is another essential factor to consider. By aligning these policies, ECEC gap can be avoided. The ECEC gap is the difference between the maximum duration of well-paid leave and the start of the universal right to ECEC or compulsory primary education. This is the period when families with young children have to make difficult decisions about whether to stay at home, whether to turn to informal care, or whether and how to pay for expensive, private ECEC.

Gap between childcare leave and place guarantee in ECEC, 2023/2024

Explanatory note: 'well-paid' childcare leave means earnings-related payment at 85% of earnings or above. It includes post-natal maternity, paternity and parental leaves. Most of the data on well-paid leave comes from the [International Handbook on Leave Policies and Research 2022](#). Leave data provided by Eurydice for Albania, Liechtenstein, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

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