EUROCHILD STATEMENT

19 June 2014


Eurochild welcomes that early childhood - the most critical period in human life - is receiving political visibility at EU level. We also welcome the proposals for a quality framework for early childhood education and care (ECEC) which should contribute to a shared understanding of quality in early years services.

As input to this conference and on-going discussions on the EU contribution to early childhood policies, Eurochild wishes to highlight the following five principles:

1. **Early childhood must be understood as a public responsibility and a public good.**

   Young children are citizens and bearers of rights. All actors in society (public sector, civil sector, private sector, interest groups, professions) share the responsibility to create and ensure an environment in which all young children and their families thrive, regardless of their socio-economic background (poverty, affluence, class), citizenship status (citizen, immigrant, asylum seeker, refugee), ethnicity (recognised /non-recognised ethnic minority), or religion.

   In the context of public policy, the values of democracy, inclusion and rights must be made explicit in policy choices. It is critical to find the right balance between individual choice and the collective interest. Children, families and practitioners will suffer from unregulated or ill-conceived marketization of early childhood services. Early childhood education and care must be understood as an entitlement for all children and be coupled with targeted support for those at risk of marginalisation including children of minority groups, children with disabilities and children living in poverty.

2. **A comprehensive early childhood policy requires holistic and integrated policy development**

   The lives of young children, their families and communities are affected by public policies across a range of sectors such as primary health care, housing, immigration, social welfare, employment, taxation, civil and legal services, urban and regional planning, and education. Governments have a responsibility to coordinate between these sectors and ensure that every public policy decision consider their impact on all young children, their families and communities. Too often public early childhood policies focus on educational achievement and school readiness and fail to make the link with pre- and post-natal maternal support and health services, nutrition and breastfeeding promotion, housing and community development.

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1 This statement is based on a working paper by Mathias Urban, Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre at the University of Roehampton, UK and co-chair of Eurochild’s thematic working group on early years education and care. It draws upon discussions and consultations with the Eurochild secretariat, co-chair Toby Wolfe, Policy and Research Officer of Start Strong Ireland, and Eurochild members. Previous Eurochild positions on early childhood education and care include:

- February 2011, Policy Position, Eurochild recommendations for EU action on early childhood education & care;
- October 2008, Statement, Investing in child well-being - inputs to the European Symposium on improving early childhood education and care
3. **Support for parents as primary care givers is critical**

Whatever the quality of ECEC services, they cannot substitute parents who carry primary responsibility for creating the right conditions for a child’s development. Coordination between policies on childcare provision and parental leave is particularly important. Approaches to parental leave vary widely across Europe. Very few countries match parental leave arrangements with the availability of affordable and accessible childcare provision. Adoption by the EU of a new parental leave framework in 2010 brought some progress. However, the Council and the European Parliament have so far failed to agree an increase to the duration and pay of maternity leave.

Furthermore early years services should not only equate with services for young children. It is critically important to work in partnership with families and parents and provide the necessary assistance whether material, emotional or advice. For ECEC services to meaningfully deliver its promise of breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage and improving outcomes for children, the combined work with families and parents becomes imperative. The Council of Europe Recommendation on positive parenting offers a helpful but still under used framework.

4. **A competent early childhood workforce requires ‘competent systems’**

Practitioners need to be able to respond to the complex needs of children and families in ever changing societal contexts. Increasing the level of qualifications as well as diversifying the types of qualification based on more experiential learning is important and recognised by the European Commission. However, individuals do not work in isolation. To improve reflective practice, it is important that professionals can engage in critical reflection and joint learning. Practitioners need to have paid time to engage with their peers, in teams, with other institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families), and with the governance system. The European study on ‘competence requirements in early childhood education and care’ (CORE) refers to this as the need to develop ‘competent systems’.

5. **Evaluation and research need to focus on children’s real outcomes in the present and in the future**

Eurochild supports the call for more evidence-informed policies and practices in early childhood education and care. The proposed European quality framework for early childhood education and care should help strengthen systems that develop, maintain and monitor quality in early childhood provision. However, a key question remains as to whether the research and evidence is actually improving ‘outcomes’ for children, both in terms of their experiences in the education system at present and over the life course. There is increasing evidence that for many marginalised children, families and communities, particularly those of Roma and Traveller origins, the research is not bringing about any change or improvements.

Approaches to research and evaluation must therefore be designed hand-in-hand with practitioners, it must take account of ‘what happens in the margins’, and it must be trans-disciplinary.

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3 Council of Europe Recommendation 19 (2006) on policy to support positive parenting, December 2006.