

# How to ensure that the benefits of early childhood education and care are realised

**Michel Vandebroek** [Ghent University – [michel.vandebroek@ugent.be](mailto:michel.vandebroek@ugent.be)]

**Karolien Lenaerts** [CEPS – [karolien.lenaerts@ceps.eu](mailto:karolien.lenaerts@ceps.eu)]

**Miroslav Beblavý** [CEPS – [miroslav.beblavy@ceps.eu](mailto:miroslav.beblavy@ceps.eu)]

The provision of high-quality early childhood education and care offers extensive economic, social and developmental benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children. Nevertheless, due to methodological and data-related constraints, empirically documenting such benefits is not a straightforward exercise. Furthermore, the quality of such education and care, which is determined by a variety of factors, including staff qualifications, curriculum, organisation, monitoring and funding, is of crucial importance.

The provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is increasingly regarded as a central part of education policy in the EU. Participation in ECEC, which can be defined as the provision for children from birth through to compulsory and primary education, is believed to be beneficial to the individual and society at large. ECEC lays the foundation on which future learning can be built.

For these reasons, the EU has been a strong advocate of ECEC in recent years. In fact, one of the EU2020 benchmarks calls for at least 95% of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory primary education to be the beneficiary of ECEC. In line with this target, participation in ECEC is on the rise, both in terms of the number of children enrolled and the hours spent. Yet, the enrolment rates of disadvantaged children, who would benefit most from ECEC, are still below those of their counterparts.

## BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Participation in early childhood education and care is found to have a significant, beneficial impact both at the individual and societal level and in the short and long run, in different domains. Academic work in multiple disciplines documents the beneficial impact of ECEC on cognitive, emotional and social development. Most of the evidence, however, originates from the US, and these are the only studies tracking children from preschool age into adulthood. Yet, a growing number of European studies confirms the potential benefits of ECEC, even if they focus on shorter periods and are, at most, limited to following children up to adolescence. In addition, many of ECEC's outcomes are difficult to measure, and causal effects are particularly hard to establish. Results should thus be interpreted with these caveats in mind.

Participation in ECEC leads to higher educational attainment and better performance (e.g. grades, school completion). Besides, but also because of the improved educational attainment, ECEC is associated with increased labour market participation, higher earnings and productivity, improved employability, and access to better-paid jobs for the children involved. The availability of ECEC also raises the labour market participation of parents (especially mothers). In this way, the provision of ECEC can ensure that fewer children grow up in poverty or are economically or socially excluded. Other research points to the beneficial effects of ECEC on participating children's health and well-being, and crime and justice, exemplified by declines in drug or alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancies and time spent in prison.

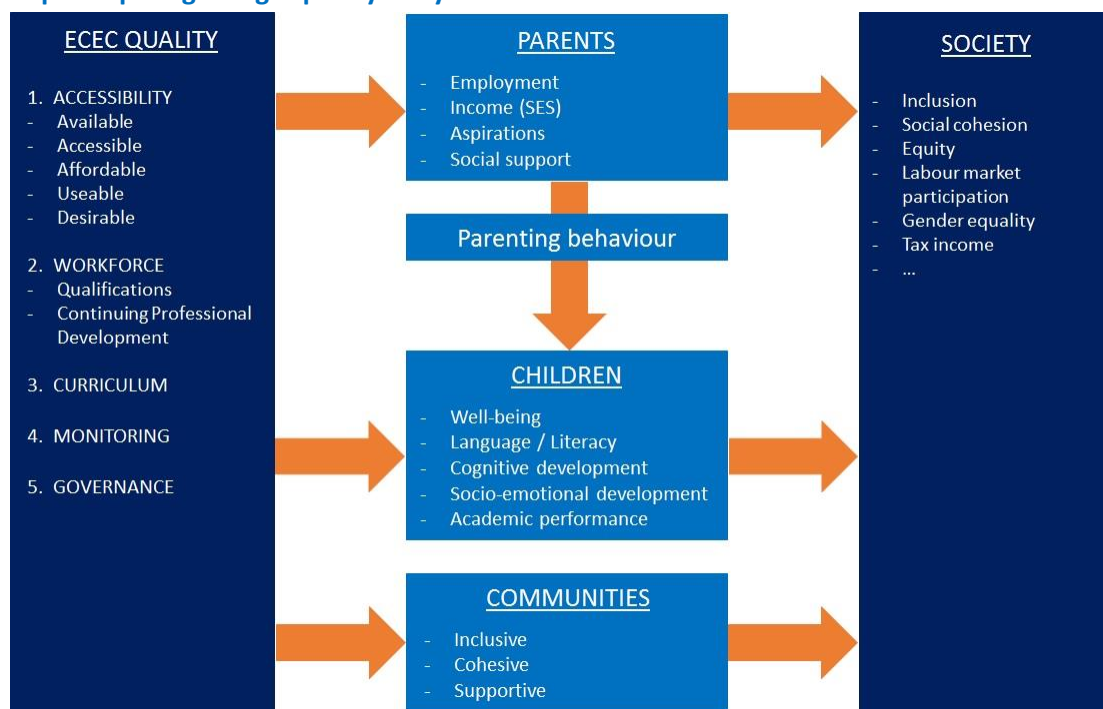
In all these areas, ECEC also has important societal effects, such as reduced spending or higher income, a more qualified labour force, improved social cohesion and integration and reduced economic and social inequalities.

## CONDITIONS CONDUCIVE TO REALISING THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND CARE

The beneficial impact of ECEC is not to be taken for granted, but rather depends on the quality of the ECEC (see Figure overleaf). There are four main factors that determine the accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care: the staff, curriculum, organisation and monitoring of the ECEC system, and the generosity of the funding.

*Staff:* The teachers, assistants and other staff members, as well as their supervisors, represent a key factor that affects the quality of ECEC provision. Staff quality in itself depends on their (formal) qualifications, in-service training, working conditions, supervision, guidance and support. Also the growing role of inter-organisational networks, integrating ECEC and social and welfare services, calls for specific skills.

**Benefits of participating in high-quality early childhood education and care on individuals and society**



In this figure, ECEC is short for early childhood education and care. Source: Own elaboration.

**Curriculum:** There is a consensus that ECEC needs to be holistic, based on pedagogic goals, and combine education and care. While a stronger focus on education may contribute to child development, studies show that a lack of attention to the caring dimension may deter parents with disadvantaged or poorer backgrounds from having their children participate in ECEC at all.

**Organisation, monitoring and funding:** There is substantial heterogeneity in the provision of ECEC across the EU, which may explain differences in outcomes. ECEC provisions and systems differ in the starting age, child-to-staff ratios, group size and other factors. The enrolment rates are highest (and inequalities are lowest) in countries offering universal provision and where ECEC is a legal entitlement. In contrast, marketisation and commodification boost inequality, even when compensatory measures like voucher systems exist. Despite the advantages of universal provision and legal entitlement, they come with fiscal implications and require an adequate, centrally run governance framework.

Besides these conditions, research has also studied the role of parents and family background. Factors such as financial resources, family structure and the parents' education level have all been found to have an impact on ECEC participation

and outcomes. Evidence on parental involvement, however, is mixed. While it is often assumed that a close involvement of parents in the early years is beneficial, such involvement can be counterproductive, as it may reflect the expectations of middle-class parents on parental involvement and hence aggravate inequalities.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Despite the growing evidence based on the potential benefits of ECEC and their determinants in Europe, continued efforts to collect, analyse and evaluate data are needed. The evidence on long-run outcomes, in particular, is still quite limited, but it is crucial to establish causality. Given the heterogeneity in national ECEC traditions and practices, comparative work covering multiple EU countries would be valuable. Such research might also reveal good practices that countries can pick up from each other.

Besides encouraging further research, policy-makers should continue to advance the accessibility and quality of ECEC. In order to do so, they need to target several fronts at the same time. This may be a challenging task, whose key element lies in devoting special attention to disadvantaged children.

For more details see: Michel Vandenbroeck, Karolien Lenaerts, Miroslav Beblavý, *Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them*.

EENEE Analytical Report No. 32, January 2018, <http://www.eenee.de/eeneeHome/EENEE/Analytical-Reports.html>

European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE)  
Funded by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture



EENEE publications and further information at: <http://www.eenee.org>. – Coordination: CEPS – Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, and ifo Institute – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research, University of Munich.

© EENEE 2018. All rights reserved. Opinions expressed in this brief are those of the author(s) alone and not of the European Commission.

European Expert Network on Economics of Education (EENEE)  
Funded by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture



Erasmus+

EENEE publications and further information at: <http://www.eenee.org>. – Coordination: CEPS – Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, and ifo Institute – Leibniz Institute for Economic Research, University of Munich.

© EENEE 2018. All rights reserved. Opinions expressed in this brief are those of the author(s) alone and not of the European Commission.