

# Standards of Quality for Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities

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## Background

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has two major functions: to help **parents' participation in the labour market**, and to **foster children's development**. Governments frequently make the mistake of focussing on one only of these functions. Good quality, affordable ECEC helps the reconciliation of work and family life and thus **fosters parental labour market participation and gender equality**. Improving childcare may also improve declining fertility rates, by lowering the cost of childbearing in terms of employment and career opportunities. The use of childcare will be affected by parental leave and the availability, cost, and quality of care.

The importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services has been recognised at the EU level, and the Barcelona Summit of 2002 produced explicit conclusions and targets for the provision of childcare services. Also the European Council agreed that Member States should remove disincentives to female participation in the labour market and strive to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age. These targets have been reaffirmed as recently as 2008 in the employment guidelines (2008-10) adopted by the European Council.

**Availability of formal childcare** is only one factor determining parental employment. Other factors include cultural norms, affordability, flexibility and quality of childcare. OECD analyses (2011) show that, in most EU States, childcare cost is high but is usually offset by subsidies. However, parents regard childcare cost as a major issue, and Mills et al. (2013) report the main reason for parents not working is childcare cost. Overall, 53 % of parents report that they are not working full-time because childcare is too expensive, 25 % mention lack of childcare availability and **only 4 % mention quality of childcare**.

In the Czech Republic, however, the situation is different and the **public opinion on women's role in society and on the use of childcare services** is [very different from the opinion in other EU countries](#). Women who would like to make use of the existent childcare facilities are often discouraged from the family, partners, friends or acquaintances. There is a big discussion going on in the Czech Republic about the impact of childcare services on the development of the child and the families who decide to put their children (even for a very limited amount of hours a week) to a facility are considered bad parents and **careerists who prioritize their own desires to the child's well-being**.

Overall, **high-quality childcare has been associated with benefits for children's development**, with the strongest effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evidence on preschool years (over three years) is fairly consistent, but the evidence for birth to three years is equivocal with some studies finding negative effects, some no effects and some positive effects associated with childcare. Discrepant results relate partly to age of starting and partly to **quality of childcare**. Czech mothers, who are often influenced by the negative public opinion, are more likely to use preschool education facilities when they are of sufficient quality.

## Current situation in ECEC

In the Czech Republic, the **crèches** were very popular in communist times. Before 1989 nurseries were often used by mothers on a daily basis to ensure full employment. However, during these times the nurseries got a very bad reputation. The facilities which were criticized the most were the so called “week crèches” - the children were put to the crèche on Monday and picked up on Friday which of course influenced the children negatively (also through the so called separation anxiety).

Crèches as such ceased to function as a medical facility on 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2013. Legislatively, they were replaced by **child groups**. Child groups allow for the care of children from one year old to the beginning of compulsory schooling (6 or 7 years). The basic requirements for the quality of the service provided are set in the law on child groups, however, there are significant gaps and the **level of quality of child groups varies significantly**.

How should parents, the users of these services, know what facility to choose and whether their children are cared for in sufficient quality? Some decide based on their own intuition, some based on recommendation, but unfortunately there is no system of quality of these facilities.

## The project idea

During the project **Standards of Quality for Early Childhood Education and Care Facilities** we would like to prepare the standards of quality for facilities taking care of children up to 3 years old (in the Czech Republic the target groups are child groups, but in other countries it would be pre-kindergartens or other ECEC facilities).

The base for the creation of the Standards is the already existent [Standards for Social Services](#). The standards define a set of measurable and verifiable criteria which enable a meaningful assessment of quality of the service. The idea is not to determine new rules or obligations for the providers of the services, but to create a tool for the users of the service (the parents) to recognize a quality provider.

The standards will protect the rights of children, i.e. the end-users of the service, they will contribute to the development of the organization as a service provider, they will help parents and, last but not least, the employees (nurses) working in the childcare facilities.

The aims of the project are the following:

- 1) **Exchange of know-how** among the childcare services providers in 5 EU countries including debates among the managers of the facilities, the employees (carers) and the users (parents) in order to define the most important quality criteria in early childcare and education
- 2) **Creation of a set of Standards of Quality for ECEC Facilities** based on the exchange of know-how including a methodology for evaluating the quality of a childcare facility
- 3) **Pilot testing** of the Standards of Quality in at least 7 ECEC facilities and creation of a best practice and bad practice catalogue for ECEC

Family and Job as an umbrella organisation currently having more than 100 members (about 1/5 of all child groups existent in the Czech Republic) will furthermore promote the Standards among the child groups and parents and introduce them as a kind of quality sign for child groups.

## The project application

The project will be a Strategic Partnerships for vocational education and training in the area of Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. The deadline for submission to the Czech National Agency is the 21st of March. **We are looking for partners - ECEC facilities or their founders in the Erasmus+ programme countries. Especially welcomed are partners from Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Baltic countries, France or Austria.**

### Activities of the project:

- 3 transnational meetings for 2 participants from each country
- 2 short-term joint staff training events for 3 participants from each country (5 days each)
- 3 intellectual outputs
  - target group analysis - survey among the parents and its evaluation including recommendation for ECEC providers
  - Standards of Quality for ECEC
  - best practice and bad practice catalogue for ECEC providers based on the pilot testing of the Standards

If you are interested in cooperation, please send us your partner information form (including PIC number and previous project experience) **before 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2018.**

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