# Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table of contents</strong></td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figures</strong></td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Background and key messages</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Government support for holistic early childhood development</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Provision of early childhood education and care</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Key government initiatives 2017–2021</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Targeted measures for ECEC professionals, disadvantaged families,</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Broader trends around holistic early childhood development</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Progress towards greater emphasis on holistic early childhood</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Challenges hampering improvements in early years policy and</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3. Developments in research and evaluations around early childhood</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conclusion</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About this report</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Overview of the various actors in the French ECEC system as of December 2021</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Expenditure on education per student in France, in euros, 2010–2019</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Childcare distribution by care option for children aged three or under (2013)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Non-parental childcare option considered ‘best for the child’ (2020)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Childcare distribution by care option and family revenue level for children aged three or under (2013)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Preschool enrolment rates, 2018 and 2021</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Background and key messages

This report provides a state-of-play for holistic early years education and care in the French context, with a particular focus on the socio-emotional domain and the promotion of social mobility. It provides an overview of developments in government support over the course of the 2017–2022 Macron presidency, as well as their drawbacks and limitations. The report also considers broader trends across French society and early years practice over this period to assess the extent to which practice is evolving and identify the key challenges that remain. Finally, in recognition of the importance of evidence-based policy, this report examines relevant gaps in research.

The objective of this report is to provide funders, decision makers and other actors who are new to the early years space with an introduction to recent developments in policy and practice and to areas where further action is still needed to support meaningful change.

The findings in this report are based on document reviews and stakeholder interviews carried out between 2018 and 2021. This research was funded by Porticus France.

A range of formal childcare options are available in France, but provision and use are far from universal

Since 2019, preschool attendance from the age of three has been obligatory, and nearly all children aged three to six years are enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC). However, around only half of children under the age of three attend a form of formal childcare. The number of places in formal childcare decreased in the years leading up to 2022, although the proportional coverage increased due to population decline.

Childminders are the most commonly used type of formal childcare, despite childcare centres being seen as most beneficial for the child and a lighter financial burden for the parents. This disparity is primarily due to the limited number of places available in collective childcare, although government efforts have led to an increase in available places in recent years.

---

1 Recognising development as ‘holistic’ means understanding that the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and language domains of development ‘must all work together to enable progress through each step’ (UNESCO 2014).
Despite government measures, disadvantaged families still face a number of barriers to formal childcare

The cost of childcare varies considerably depending on the type of service, the type of provider and the personal circumstances of the parents. Various governmental measures are in place to financially support families to access childcare, although costs can still be prohibitive for some families, particularly given the recent expansion of private provision. Moreover, childcare provision does not always meet families’ diverse needs and constraints, including irregular or seasonal hours, and the availability of ‘drop in’ provision has fallen significantly in recent times.

Informational, cultural and administrative barriers also exist in the use of formal childcare. Further research and action are required to overcome the reluctance among many disadvantaged families to draw on formal childcare, even when it is available and financially accessible.

Three key government initiatives have been introduced in recent years, although funding remains limited

One of the five key pillars of the 2018 Interministerial Strategy for the Prevention of and Fight Against Poverty (Stratégie interministérielle de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté, or, more commonly, plan pauvreté; hereinafter the counter-poverty strategy) was addressing the inequalities that emerge in the early years and perpetuate cycles of poverty. This was the first government plan to emphasise the role of early childhood in reproducing inequalities, and it is pioneering in its focus on the quality of childcare provision. Ambitious targets were set, and as of December 2021, mixed levels of progress had been achieved in terms of attaining the counter-poverty strategy’s objectives.

While most children were already attending preschool from age three, compulsory formal education from age three was introduced in 2019 in an effort to address regional disparities in enrolment, enforce regular attendance and reach the most vulnerable families and those furthest from the system.

The First 1000 Days Commission (commission des 1000 premiers jours) was formed in 2019, with a report published in 2020, which set the ambition of creating a foundational resource of scientific evidence and recommendations upon which an integrated public policy for this period of a child’s life would be founded. The report was particularly significant for the emphasis it placed on the child’s socio-emotional development. The report was followed up by a public awareness campaign and various knowledge-dissemination measures. A number of the recommended actions have also been picked up by both governmental and non-governmental actors, although dedicated funding remains limited. This initiative has been seen as galvanising attention for and change within the ECEC sector.

There is growing emphasis on holistic early childhood development in the first three years, but preschool priorities remain on a different trajectory

Increasing emphasis is being placed on the role of childcare provision in supporting holistic development from a very young age, and consequently a greater concern for the quality of provision, not just coverage. Governmental and non-governmental discourse on these subjects has grown considerably, although concrete action and funding still lag. Moreover,
while the *First 1000 Days* report emphasises the child’s socio-emotional development, discourse and action around preschool is heading in the opposite direction, with increasing emphasis being placed on its role in preparing children for academic success.

**Fragmented governance creates significant challenges for transforming the system**

ECEC provision is split between two ministries and a wide range of actors and funding sources. This dual, fragmented and decentralised governance system continues to significantly hamper progress in relation to the universal quantity and quality of provision, as well as continuity between childcare and preschool. The number of governmental and non-governmental actors and strategies in the space leads to a duplication of efforts and limited scaling up or transferral of actions and learning. The government is making efforts to create more synergy among these actors and elements, although an integrated early years policy and designated accountability are still lacking. In addition, responsibility for childcare provision primarily lies with regional and local authorities. This contributes towards significant regional disparities in terms of both the quantity and quality of provision. Longstanding problems on the ground, particularly in relation to staffing, have also created challenges for translating new government policy into meaningful changes in practice.

**A positive shift appears to be underway in relation to research and evaluation, but important gaps and barriers remain**

While research and data collection relating to socio-emotional development in the early years are increasing, important gaps in the evidence – such as the reasons behind a reluctance to engage with ECEC services among certain population groups – remain. Evaluations of relevant policies and practice are becoming increasingly common, and their importance for effective action are being recognised. Nonetheless, normalising evaluative practice involves significant cultural shift and logistical challenges, which means that a rigorous, evidence-based approach to both policy and action remains a long way from being standard practice. Moreover, the implementation of rigorous impact evaluations is significantly limited by their logistical feasibility and expense, which means less rigorous evaluation practices are often put in place.
Holistic early education and care
Government support for holistic early childhood development

This section outlines the key components of the French government’s work to support holistic early childhood development (ECD) through ECEC services and initiatives targeting relevant stakeholder groups and populations of concern, between May 2017 and December 2021.

2.1. Provision of early childhood education and care

According to a 2018 study, 52 per cent of families in France with at least one child under the age of three use some form of childcare or preschool. For children aged between three and six, the proportion is close to 100 per cent.² This section outlines the key actors and overall expenditure involved in ECEC provision in France; the nature of this provision for children aged zero to three (primarily childcare) and three to six (preschool); and ongoing barriers to universal access. This information relates to the situation in France as of December 2021.

2.1.1. Key actors and expenditure in the area of ECEC provision in France

At the national level, responsibility for ECEC is split between two ministries. The Ministry of Health and Solidarity (Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé) is responsible for providing services for children until they enter preschool (typically at age three).³ Responsibility for preschool provision then lies with the Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports).⁴ Another important actor in ECEC is the National Family Allowances Fund (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales [CNAF]), which provides financial aid to families. Local authorities are also involved in childcare provision for children under the age of three, as they help finance childcare services.⁵ Other actors that provide services to disadvantaged families and children include the National Council for Child Protection (Conseil national de la protection de l’enfance [CNPE]), a

---

³ With the dissolution of the Ministry of Health and Solidarity into two new ministries in July 2022, responsibility for ECEC provision prior to the child entering preschool was assigned to the new Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy and Persons with a Disability (Ministère des Solidarités, de l’Autonomie et des Personnes handicapées).
⁴ RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the Fédération française des entreprises de crèches (FFEC) (int-1) on 7 November 2018; OECD (2016). The Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports became the Ministry of National Education and Young People (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse) in July 2022.
⁵ CAF (2017).
Holistic early education and care

consultative body under the Ministry of Health and Solidarity responsible for policies relating to child protection, and the national advisory body for family policy (Haut Conseil de la famille, de l’enfance et de l’âge [HCFEA]), under the office of the Prime Minister. An overview of these actors is provided in Figure 1.

Public expenditure allocated to childcare and preschool programmes, as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), was around 1.3 per cent in 2017, as compared with 0.6 per cent in 1990. Of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, only Norway, Sweden and Iceland are reported to spend proportionally more in this area. Nonetheless, one interviewee emphasised that, historically, France has mostly invested in secondary school and higher education and has invested comparatively little in primary and preschool education. Indeed, in 2018, the French government spent 49 per cent more per child on secondary education than it did on primary and preschool education combined. This is compared with, for example, the UK government, which spent just

---

Figure 1: Overview of the various actors in the French ECEC system as of December 2021

Source: RAND Europe.

---

6 Martin (2017).
7 OECD (2019).
8 OECD (2017).
9 OECD (2019).
10 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018 and an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
It is apparent, however, that such a trend is starting to shift, with a growth in expenditure on primary and preschool education, as shown in Figure 2.

### 2.1.2. Childcare provision for children under three years

Parents of children under three years of age have the option of engaging with different types of childcare provision, both collective (e.g., childcare centres – crèches) and individual (e.g., childminders – assistant(e)s maternel(le)s). These services are a mixture of public and private, and while many are subsidised by the government, they are not free.

**Childminders are the most common type of formal childcare**

The most recent large-scale childcare survey (enquête ‘Modes de garde et d’accueil des jeunes enfants’) was carried out by the French national research body Direction de la recherche, des études, de l’évaluation et des statistiques (DREES) in 2013. Data collection for the next iteration of this survey started in October 2021. According to the 2013 data, more than one in two parents do not employ any kind of formal childcare as their primary child-minding option (see Figure 3). Childminders were the most common type of formal childcare used (19 per cent of children aged zero to three years), followed by centre-based care services (13 per cent). Micro-centres, while still a small proportion of childcare centres in total, constitute a rapidly growing sector.

---

13 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
14 DREES (2021).
Figure 3: Childcare distribution by care option for children aged three or under (2013)

- 60% Parents
- 19% Certified childminder
- 13% Centre-based childcare
- 3% Grandparents or other family members
- 3% Preschool
- 1% Nanny
- 1% Other


Growing subset.17 Only 1 per cent of parents employ home-based care (nannies), in part as it is the most expensive option for parents.18 In addition, it must be kept in mind that 41 per cent of parents draw on more than one form of childcare service.19 Moreover, because DREES carries out these studies only every seven years, this data will not have captured any recent developments.

The theory of a ‘free choice’ system is undermined by limited places

Childcare in France is described by the government as a ‘free choice’ system for parents, meaning that – in theory at least – there are many different types of childcare provision of equivalent quality available for parents to choose from.20 This free choice is supported by the French Family Allowances Funds (Caisses d’allocations familiales [CAF]) through the provision of financial support to both the families and the childcare services.21 This choice between different but ostensibly equivalent forms of childcare has been adhered to by successive governments, and there has been a strong emphasis on providing families with childcare centre opening hours that suit the needs of working parents.22 In practice,
however, this concept of free choice tends to be undermined by the number of places available, with choice of childcare described by a number of interviewees as being primarily ‘by default’, based on the availability of places. Data from 2016 show that 8.7 per cent of parents cited non-availability of places as the main reason for formal childcare services not meeting their needs – more than double the EU average of 3.9 per cent, and the accessibility and availability of different childcare options have been found to play a greater role in the parents’ choice than any sociodemographic characteristics. Indeed, formal childcare provision is available for only half of eligible children (59.3 places per 100 children as of 2018), and while coverage has been increasing in recent years due to population decline, the absolute number of places available is in slight decline. Furthermore, there are regional disparities due to a significant imbalance in the availability of places and in the quality of the offer across regions and local authorities. As of 2018, 9.2 out of 100 eligible children in Guyana and 30.8 in Seine-Saint-Denis had access to professional childcare, as compared with 87.8 in Haute-Loire – with 98 per cent of all provision concentrated in mainland France. There are certain indications, however, that progress is being made in relation to these regional disparities.

Increasing the number of places available in centre-based childcare services specifically was one of the previous government’s objectives. The 2018–2022 target and management agreement (convention d’objectifs et de gestion) between the government and the CNAF states the ambition of creating an additional 30,000 places in centre-based services. Between 2017 and 2018, the number of places offered by collective childcare services rose by 11,300. It should be noted, however, that 8,100 of these were in micro-centres, which tend to be less available for constructing additional public childcare centres.

23 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020, a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020, an advisor for the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-8) on 29 May 2020 and the Chief of Staff in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-9) on 29 May 2020.
26 ONAPE (2020).
27 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
28 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
29 CNAF (2018); HCFA (2018b); France Stratégie (2021a); Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a); RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
30 ONAPE (2020).
31 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
32 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 7 November 2018.
33 ONAPE (2020).
34 ONAPE (2020).
Holistic early education and care

Financially accessible than standard centre-based care.35 Moreover, despite an equivalent decline in available places (11,900), as of 2018, childminders continued to make up the largest proportion of the childcare provision available.36

This provision does not, however, reflect parental preference for childcare type. Studies indicate that centre-based childcare services are most commonly seen as ‘the best option for the child’ in terms of formal childcare (see Figure 4). Moreover, research shows that a quarter of children who are cared for by childminders are in that position because they could not get a place in a public childcare centre or because such centres were not compatible with their parents’ timetables.37 The criteria for allocating childcare places – such as prioritising families where both parents are employed – have also been identified as a key barrier to equal access to collective childcare.38

In any case, the greater number of local, centre-based childcare places that are available to parents, the smaller the gap between preference and usage.39 Various reasons have been offered for this widespread preference for centre-based childcare. A 2017 study reported that more than half of parents who choose to send their child to centre-based childcare services are motivated by the supposed benefits for the child’s development, claiming that they are ‘more enriching for the child.’40 There is evidence to suggest that centre-based

Figure 4: Non-parental childcare option considered ‘best for the child’ (2020)

Source: DREES (2020).

35 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
36 ONAPE (2020).
37 Castell (2019).
38 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
39 Castell (2019).
40 Virot (2017).
childcare is beneficial in terms of the child’s school results, equality of opportunity, health, social skills, emotional development, behavioural development and understanding of diversity.\(^\text{41}\) A 2019 report, however, pointed out that centre-based childcare may be preferred because this form of provision presents a lighter financial burden as a result of the financial assistance provided by the government.\(^\text{42}\) It is also worth noting that one study indicates that families that prioritise the development of their child ‘through an affective relationship’ during childcare are more likely to choose childminders or nannies.\(^\text{43}\)

Financial accessibility remains a key barrier despite the availability of financial support

Childcare services are run by a variety of stakeholders, depending on the type of service and location, including municipalities, public bodies, associations, CAFs and parents.\(^\text{44}\) The cost for parents varies depending on the type of service – or combination of services – chosen, whether it is provided by a public body or by a private company, and on the personal circumstances of the parents, such as the number of children and monthly salary.\(^\text{45}\)

In general, centre-based care services are the least costly, as fees for families are proportional to their income,\(^\text{46}\) followed by childminders.\(^\text{47}\) While public provision remains the most predominant, the private sector is now seeing substantial growth in this area.\(^\text{48}\) Parents are offered subsidies and benefits by the government when placing their child in childcare services. These benefits and subsidies depend on various factors, including the number of children, the age of the children and the financial means of the parents.\(^\text{49}\) These benefits and subsidies include a bonus paid upon the child’s birth or adoption (prime à naissance ou à l’adoption); an allowance related to the educational expenses of the children (allocation de base); a childcare ‘free choice’ supplement, where parents are partly reimbursed if they use a childminder or home-based care (complément de libre choix du mode garde); and a ‘free choice’ of parental activity supplement, where parents receive benefits if they stop working or reduce their working hours to care for their children (complément libre choix d’activité).\(^\text{50}\) There are additional support mechanisms specifically geared towards low-income families, as

---

\(^\text{41}\) Salthun-Lassale (2018).
\(^\text{42}\) Castell (2019).
\(^\text{43}\) Laporte (2019).
\(^\text{44}\) Amrous & Borderies (2018).
\(^\text{45}\) Villaume (2015); RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED [int-4] on 14 November 2018; France Stratégie (2021a).
\(^\text{46}\) RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF [int-23] on 4 August 2020; CAF (2019). There are rare exceptions to this, in cases where centres refuse to comply with this or when the centre is run by a private company (RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF [int-23] on 4 August 2020).
\(^\text{47}\) CAF (2017).
\(^\text{48}\) RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD [int-10] on 22 October 2021.
\(^\text{49}\) CAF (2022).
\(^\text{50}\) CAF (2022).
detailed in Section 2.3.2. A number of additional measures were also put in place to support childcare services during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, from 16 March to 11 May 2020, children of priority workers were able to access collective childcare despite enforced closures, with CAFs taking on the costs that would usually have been incurred by families, resulting in a total public expenditure of 7.3 million euros.\textsuperscript{52}

However, it has been noted by the CNPE that more could still be done to help disadvantaged families, including improving financial benefits.\textsuperscript{53} The cost of childcare can still constitute a significant proportion of the family budget,\textsuperscript{54} to the extent that the additional income provided by both parents working may not compensate for it.\textsuperscript{55} As of 2013, even with state financial assistance, parents with a modest income were nearly four times more likely to care for their child themselves or draw on grandparents as childcare resources, as compared with parents who were better off,\textsuperscript{56} as shown in Figure 5.\textsuperscript{57}

Indeed, in 2016, 83 per cent of parents cited cost as a ‘very’ or ‘quite’ important factor when...
making childcare decisions. Well-off families are also more likely to consider childminders and nannies the best for children and to make use of these options.

Data from 2016 reported that the formal childcare needs of 13.6 per cent of parents were not being met for primarily financial reasons. While this number is below the EU average of 16.2 per cent, as of early 2020 it remained the case that only 5 per cent of children from disadvantaged backgrounds attended childcare centres, as compared with 22 per cent of children from well-off families. Moreover, although childminders are the most common form of childcare, they are also less financially accessible than collective childcare options. In January 2021, the State Secretary for Children and Families (Secrétaire d’État en charge de l’enfance et des familles) asked the HCFEA to analyse the differences in parental costs for childcare depending on type of childcare, and to propose options for reforming the subsidy system to reduce these differences, with the particular aim of enabling low-income families to access childminders and limiting threshold effects.

There is also a concern that families are not aware of the various financial support options available to them, although the CNAF has now created a dedicated website presenting the childcare options and financial support available to the various family incomes and compositions.

Other barriers to accessing formal childcare

In addition to financial costs, certain informational, cultural and administrative barriers exist in relation to accessing formal childcare, particularly for vulnerable populations, such as non-French-speaking communities or families with no fixed abode, who may not be aware of the services in place to assist them. Moreover, childcare provision does not always correspond with families’ diverse needs and constraints. For example, parents who work irregular or seasonal hours may also struggle to access suitable childcare options, even if the CNAF is encouraging childcare centres to offer greater flexibility in care. This is likely to be an increasing concern as ‘drop-in’ provision (accueil occasionnel) becomes less of a priority for childcare centres. In other cases, families may also

58 Laporte (2019).
59 Castell (2019).
60 Eurostat (2018).
62 Dubos (2020).
63 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a); RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
64 HCFEA (2021).
65 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
66 France Stratégie (2021a).
67 RAND Europe interview with a coordinator at COFRAGE (int-2) on 12 November 2018 and an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-3) on 14 November 2018.
68 Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).
69 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
70 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
simply not be aware of the variety of childcare options available to them\textsuperscript{71} or that they qualify for them.\textsuperscript{72}

At the same time, there is often a reluctance among disadvantaged families to take up formal childcare places that are available.\textsuperscript{73} As of 2018, only 45 per cent of eligible families made use of formal childcare.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, this rate varies according to standard of living, family configuration and parental activity, with only 19 per cent of families living under the poverty line and 17 per cent of single-parent families using formal childcare.\textsuperscript{75} Beyond the barriers relating to provision and finances outlined above, very little is known about the reasons behind non-engagement with childcare options, due to a lack of relevant research,\textsuperscript{76} although various possible reasons have been proposed, including cultural barriers, lack of administrative competences or trust in public institutions, and perceptions that use of formal childcare indicates failure or neglect by the mother or may have negative consequences for the child.\textsuperscript{77} Consequently, to increase access to formal childcare for the most vulnerable children, there is a need not only for locally available, low-cost provision, but also for public actions to reach these families and convince them of the benefits of childcare for their child.\textsuperscript{78} While the government launched a national call for trialling initiatives addressing non-use of childcare in 2021,\textsuperscript{79} one interviewee indicated that they did not feel a lot of progress is as yet being made in this area,\textsuperscript{80} and France has also been criticised for failing to make childcare a legal entitlement for the most vulnerable children.\textsuperscript{81}

2.1.3. Formal preschool education for all children from age three

As of September 2019, formal education has been obligatory for children from the age of three, in accordance with the school reforms act (Loi pour une école de la confiance).\textsuperscript{82} It is still possible for parents to use home schooling or kindergartens (jardins d’enfants), or to have their children attend preschool only part-time, subject to official government authorisation.\textsuperscript{83} Almost all children aged between three and six were already attending preschool prior to the change in law (see Figure 6); however, as with childcare attendance, there existed significant

\textsuperscript{71} RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
\textsuperscript{72} RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
\textsuperscript{73} RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021 and an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
\textsuperscript{74} France Stratégie (2021a).
\textsuperscript{75} France Stratégie (2021a).
\textsuperscript{76} RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021, an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\textsuperscript{77} RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\textsuperscript{78} France Stratégie (2021a); RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
\textsuperscript{79} Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\textsuperscript{80} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
\textsuperscript{81} Eurochild (2021a).
\textsuperscript{82} Légifrance (2019).
\textsuperscript{83} Garnier (2019).
regional disparities, with only 67 per cent of three-year-olds in Seine-Saint-Denis attending preschool, for example, as compared with the national average of 97 per cent. Moreover, hours of attendance had previously been flexible, where now there is an obligation of attendance during school hours, unless the child is given a specific exemption. As shown in Figure 6, there has been a slight increase in preschool enrolment among three- and four-year-olds since this change in policy, as well as a slight decline in (voluntary) enrolment among two-year-olds.

From September 2022, the obligation for formal education (instruction) will be replaced by the obligation for school attendance (scolarisation) from age three as part of the law to strengthen respect for the principles of the Republic (Loi confortant le respect des principes de la république). While home schooling will still be permitted for reasons relating to the child’s health, intense sporting or artistic activities, educational needs, or itinerant lifestyle, it will require governmental authorisation and must meet strict educational requirements.

2.2. Key government initiatives 2017–2021

Between 2017 and 2021, in an effort to improve access to ECEC services and support positive ECD, the government introduced three key initiatives relating to both childcare and preschool. This section will provide a brief outline of each of these three initiatives. Further

---

84 Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a)
85 Benarousse (2019).
86 Vie publique (2021a).
87 Vie publique (2021a).
detail regarding the implications of these and other initiatives for the specific stakeholder groups of interest – ECEC professionals, parents and disadvantaged families – will be provided in Section 2.3. While it is not within the scope of this study to comment on the relevance or efficacy of the measures that have been introduced, where possible the following sections will seek to convey any evidence of whether pre-determined outcomes have been achieved and/or impacts have been observed. It has not been within the scope of this study to assess the quality of this evidence.

2.2.1. Interministerial Strategy for the Prevention of and Fight Against Poverty

As of 2015, an estimated 3 million children were living in poverty in France. Moreover, research shows that inequalities affect people from early childhood; for example, children from disadvantaged families will have a weaker vocabulary than those from better-off families, a factor that will affect their chances of success throughout their education. In response to this reality, a new national strategy was announced in September 2018 on the prevention of and fight against poverty. One of the five key pillars of the counter-poverty strategy involves a focus on inequalities that emerge in the early years and which perpetuate cycles of poverty – the first government plan to emphasise the significance of early childhood in reproducing inequalities. The counter-poverty strategy was particularly innovative in its focus on the qualitative aspects of childcare provision, through training for professionals and investing in regional projects, in place of just the quantity of provision available. The role of regional Counter-Poverty Commissioner (commissaire à la lutte contre la pauvreté) was created in September 2019 to support implementation of the counter-poverty strategy with strategic and operational coherence to the various public policies, while also ensuring that the counter-poverty strategy was implemented in a manner adapted to the needs of the specific region. The measures have been allocated a budget of 1.24 billion euros and are further detailed in Sections 2.3.1–2.3.3, below.

France Stratégie’s interim evaluation report, released in March 2021, presented a mixed picture of the counter-poverty strategy’s progress in relation to the early years. The report highlighted the insufficiency of monitoring and evaluation data, particularly in quantitative terms, and a lack of evaluation indicators for six of the ten measures relating to the early years and education, without which it will not be possible to assess their efficacy. The report specifically noted, with regret, that only two of the measures relating

---

89 De Bodman et al. (2017).
92 RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021, a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
93 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
94 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
96 France Stratégie (2021c).
97 France Stratégie (2021c).
to the early years had made good progress, despite the emphasis that had been placed on the early years when the counter-poverty strategy was first launched, in 2018. More broadly, the report highlighted insufficient political support for the delegation in charge of the counter-poverty strategy to achieve the interministerial coordination and direction necessary for meeting its ambitions. Adapting implementation to the needs of the different regions has also presented significant challenges, and uptake of the counter-poverty strategy’s measures by the relevant actors lags behind ambitions. One Counter-Poverty Commissioner also mentioned challenges relating not to the quantity of funding available, but to the way in which it is being used, with some measures failing to either consume or effectively re-allocate their dedicated funds.

In part due to the Covid-19 pandemic, municipal elections and structural challenges, an adviser of the counter-poverty strategy’s interministerial delegation (conseiller de la délégation interministérielle) reported in November 2021 that the counter-poverty strategy had failed in relation to one of its core objectives around the creation of additional childcare provision, with only 17 per cent of the 2022 objectives for this measure having been achieved by March 2021. However, in February 2021, in order to encourage the creation of further provision and support childcare centres through the Covid-19 crisis, the CNAF adopted a ‘booster plan’ (Plan rebond) of 300 million euros for the most disadvantaged regions. As of August 2021, 4,000 new places had been created as a result of this additional support. A councillor in the early years from the delegation indicated that they felt that the attenuation of the pandemic, the stabilisation of local authorities and this additional funding from CAFs will establish the momentum for creating additional provision. A Counter-Poverty Commissioner interviewee also highlighted the counter-poverty strategy’s success in relation to the more qualitative aspects of its ambitions, such as greater coordination at the regional level among childcare centres and other relevant local actors.

2.2.2. Lowering of the age of compulsory education

A fundamental change to the preschool system occurred with the introduction, in September 2019, of compulsory education from the age of three. This measure was presented as one of ‘social justice’ as it was seen to reinforce
Holistic early education and care

the importance of preschool within the French education system, including its decisive role in combating inequality. Preschools consequently bear the explicit ambition of placing children on an equal footing for when they begin school, including in relation to regional disparities in the attendance of centre-based care services. While the large majority of children in the three to six age group were already enrolled in preschool (see Section 2.1.3), the measure sought to strengthen equality of access and encourage strict, regular attendance with the expectation that children will be entering into a structured learning schedule from age three, albeit through play, creativity, interactions, etc.

Preschool attendance is not, however, compulsory: families may still choose to home-school their child instead, subject to regular state assessment. However, home schooling will become more closely monitored with the introduction of compulsory school attendance from September 2022, which emphasises the necessity of parents providing a genuine pedagogical programme (see Section 2.1.3). There remains the option of progressive attendance for children who are perhaps not ready for full days from the start of the school year or whose schools is not yet equipped to provide food and bedding for the required number of children. Certain logistical challenges also remain to be resolved, however, including the fact that there are a limited number of schools in some of the overseas départements.

There are mixed views among the interviewees with regard to the nature and extent of the reform’s impact. Several interviewees stressed the positive impact of the reform, noting that, although the proportion of students who were not already attending preschool may be small, 26,000 children will nonetheless be affected, and the majority of these will be the most disadvantaged and the most isolated from the school system. One policymaker highlighted that the obligation applies to the schools as well, in that they can no longer turn away children seen as difficult to accommodate due, for example, to behavioural concerns or disability.

Two early years researchers argued, however, that there is very little data available about

110 Benarousse (2019); Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020b).
111 Rédaction Europe1.fr (2018); Battaglia (2018); RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018.
112 OECD (2020); Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a).
113 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
114 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020.
115 Vie publique (2021a).
116 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
117 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020.
118 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020, an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020 and a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021; OECD (2020); Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a).
119 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020.
those children not already enrolled in preschool, and that there is no evidence to support the claim that these children are among the most disadvantaged. Some stakeholders have also expressed concerns that such early entry into preschool may be detrimental for children due to the higher child-to-adult ratio in preschools as compared with centre-based childcare services. There has also been criticism that this attempt at greater inclusivity demonstrates more wishful thinking than practical or realistic measures, and even that starting school early may only reinforce the notion of ‘low performers’ due to class, gender, and so on, at an earlier stage. Indeed, one expert has offered evidence suggesting that the first year of preschool can be particularly discriminatory in these terms.

In addition, one researcher for the National Observatory for Early Childhood (Observatoire national de la petite enfance [ONAPE]) argued that a compulsory preschool has resulted in a shift in focus from holistic ECD to preparation for school, with a focus on language, numeracy and literacy, even though the formalised objectives have not changed since the preschool curriculum changes of 2015. As a counterpoint to this perspective, however, an OECD researcher highlighted that by acting as a preparatory stage for school, preschool in France has a positive impact on children by easing their transition from childcare structures to the school system.

Overall, this change is still very recent and there has not yet been any formal indication of the policy’s outcomes.

2.2.3. The First 1000 Days Commission and report

The First 1000 Days initiative was launched in 2019 by the State Secretary for Children and Families, with cross-cutting ambitions. While there are a large number of existing actions concerned with this period of life, they are not integrated into a single public policy, with competences spread across a range of actions. The ambition of the initiative is, consequently, to create a framework for the various actions that are already in place and reinforce the legitimacy of integrated public policy and administration in this area. The report calls for a breaking down of the silos of different actors working in this sector, to create a more holistic approach to supporting the child’s development, a greater emphasis on quality and universal access around childcare, and improved and systematic support for development and learning through this childcare provision. Particular emphasis has also been placed on responding to the commission’s recommendations at a local level by strengthening the services and support that are often already in place, according to the

121 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020 and a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020.
122 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 7 November 2018.
123 Garnier (2019).
124 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
125 RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020.
126 RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.
127 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
128 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
129 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
specific needs of the area, including through calls for local initiatives.130

The report produced by the First 1000 Days commission in September 2020, in consultation with relevant professionals, families, policymakers and other actors,131 is seen to have created a foundational knowledge base for a holistic approach to the early years in relation to education, health, child protection and parenting support.132

The report has received considerable public attention and has been recognised by experts as an important development in the field.133 Some experts did, however, express concern that the composition of the commission was not representative of the sector and that some members were overly focused on specific agendas.134

Prior to this initiative there were very few tools or resources available for parents, professionals and others to educate themselves about this period in a cohesive and accessible way.135 The report sought to provide simple, coherent and evidence-based public health messaging for parents around the early years, while emphasising the importance of guidance and support to be tailored to each family’s specific needs.136 In addition to this, a multi-year awareness-raising campaign by the National Agency for Public Health (Santé publique France) was launched and a number of knowledge-sharing tools were developed, including a website, smartphone application and summary booklet that all mothers-to-be receive upon declaration of pregnancy to the public health system.137 A large-scale trial of ‘baby boxes’ – containing all the items necessary for the daily life of parents and their young child – was planned for 2022, with the aim of promoting positive habits for the child’s health and development.138 Certain non-governmental bodies are also responding the report’s recommendations, as seen in Ensemble pour l’Éducation de la Petite Enfance (EPEPE)’s movement to develop Centres for the First 1000 Days (maisons des 1000 premiers jours).139

The HCDFEA has observed that while the report provided some guiding direction, this in turn needs to be linked up with concrete possibilities for implementation, including through public policies.140 The government has already announced its commitment to implementing a number of

---

130 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a).
131 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
132 Eurochild (2021a); RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
133 RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021, an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021, a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021, an advisor in the Délegation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021 and a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
134 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
135 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
137 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a); RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
138 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021; Eurochild (2021c).
139 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021; Eurochild (2021c).
140 HCDFEA (2020). This view was also expressed during a RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
the recommendations, in synergy with other strategies launched at the national level and anchored at the regional level.141 There has, in particular, been significant coordination and complementarity142 between the counter-poverty strategy and the First 1000 Days projects, with Counter-Poverty Commissioners supporting the First 1000 Days’ call for regional projects around training for professionals and/or support for families and with the counter-poverty strategy’s training plan for professionals aligning perfectly and explicitly with the First 1000 Days approach.143

While very little additional funding has been allocated to the initiative specifically (in part due to the challenges and priorities introduced by Covid-19), one policymaker emphasised that successful efforts have been made to redirect existing funding channels to support actions concerned with this period of life.144 However, any future integrated public policy would require dedicated funds.145

2.3. Targeted measures for ECEC professionals, disadvantaged families, and parents

This section provides an overview of relevant measures that were introduced between 2017 and 2021 to provide greater support for ECEC professionals, facilitate access to ECEC services among disadvantaged families and increase parents’ knowledge and skills around ECD.

2.3.1. Measures targeting early childhood education and care professionals

Historically, there has been very little culture for continuous professional development (CPD) in France, with related initiatives reportedly inefficient due to the lack of incentivisation for professionals to use the knowledge gained during such training.146 Insufficient training for childcare staff has also been seen as a barrier to more widespread evidence-based practice.147 Training for preschool staff has likewise been considered inadequate by international experts.148 Change in this area is, however, being observed: in 2021, an OECD researcher reported an emerging recognition within France of the importance of both initial and CPD training for childcare professionals.149

The counter-poverty strategy (see Section 2.2.1), in particular, outlined an ambitious CPD plan for childcare professionals (Ambition Enfance Égalité), with actions at the national and local level, as well as online.150 This plan has been identified as a key evolution by a number of significant stakeholders,151 as it is the first time the state has funded CPD for the

---

141 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a).
142 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
143 Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
144 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
145 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
146 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
147 RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021.
148 OECD (2020).
149 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
150 Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
151 France Stratégie (2021a).
entire sector of ECEC professionals.\textsuperscript{152} The plan’s ambition was to train 600,000 childcare professionals over three years, with a focus on providing and standardising high-quality care,\textsuperscript{153} promoting evidence-based practice,\textsuperscript{154} and reinforcing the professional legitimacy and significance of the ECEC professions.\textsuperscript{155} The training plan involves seven modules, focused on language, food and nature, art and culture, ‘drop-in’ childcare provision, combatting stereotypes, engaging with parents, and digital technologies,\textsuperscript{156} and explicitly seeks to build on recent scientific work in the field, namely the ‘Giampino’ and \textit{First 1000 Days} reports.\textsuperscript{157}

While the training is not obligatory for all professionals in the field,\textsuperscript{158} the provision format seeks to overcome all barriers that may prevent ECEC professionals from accessing training, including financial concerns, a lack of clear information around provision, and difficulties with ensuring there are cover staff to ensure the continuity of provision.\textsuperscript{159} The initial training ECEC professionals receive is also being progressively updated to integrate latest scientific developments in the area.\textsuperscript{160}

While the implementation of the measure was significantly delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic,\textsuperscript{161} the training plan was released in May 2021\textsuperscript{162} and was deployed via conventions signed with the national skills provider (\textit{opérateur de compétences [OPCO]}),\textsuperscript{163} to broadly high levels of engagement.\textsuperscript{164} As of October 2021, 32,600 training sessions had been delivered, with significant participation from childminders and nannies in addition to childcare centre staff.\textsuperscript{165}

At a regional level, funding was also provided for local actors to carry out projects relating to one or more of the seven key themes.\textsuperscript{166} As of May 2021, 124 original, multi-partner projects had been funded, involving some 20,000 professionals.\textsuperscript{167} Work is also being done by local authorities to set up ambitious CPD programmes for ECEC professionals.\textsuperscript{168}

A number of non-governmental organisations

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{152} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021); RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\bibitem{153} RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-3) on 14 November 2018.
\bibitem{154} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{155} RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020; Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021b).
\bibitem{156} Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021b).
\bibitem{157} Giampino (2016); Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
\bibitem{158} Bérard-Bergery (2018).
\bibitem{159} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{160} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{161} France Stratégie (2021c).
\bibitem{162} Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021b).
\bibitem{163} Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{164} RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\bibitem{165} Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{166} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{167} Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\bibitem{168} RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
\end{thebibliography}
have also been supporting local authorities to develop content for their CPD\textsuperscript{169} or have been delivering their own training programmes.\textsuperscript{170}

As of late 2021, it was believed that the training plan would reach its objective of 200,000 professionals receiving the training between 2020 and 2022 (the original ambition of 600,000 referring to the number of professionals with access to the training, whether or not they receive it).\textsuperscript{171} While it will be challenging to assess impact on professionals’ practices, the counter-poverty strategy is working with the OPCO to survey beneficiaries about the training’s subjective impacts.\textsuperscript{172}

In addition to emphasising the importance of both initial training and CPD for early years professionals that is evidence-based and subject to evaluation,\textsuperscript{173} the First 1000 Days report emphasised the significance of professionals’ wellbeing and the impact this can have on the children in their care.\textsuperscript{174} The report highlighted the negative impacts of low social recognition and low pay on both groups as a result of high rates of turnover.

\begin{flushright}
169 RAND Europe interview with an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
170 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
171 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
172 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\end{flushright}
and burnout. In this area, the counter-poverty strategy also identified the ambition of supporting increased communication among ECEC professionals, especially for childminders, who tend to work on their own.\textsuperscript{176}

In September 2021, \textbf{compliance with the National Childcare Charter} developed from the 2016 ‘Giampino’ report\textsuperscript{177} became a legal obligation.\textsuperscript{178} This has been seen by some stakeholders as a key milestone in the ensuring the operational quality of childcare settings.\textsuperscript{179} To be able to renew their licence, childcare centres will now need to demonstrate that they have an educational project that has objectives and activities in place to apply the principles of the Charter.\textsuperscript{180} The Charter also highlights the importance of childcare professionals’ wellbeing and training as one of its key principles.\textsuperscript{181}

In addition, the law for accelerating and simplifying public actions (Loi d’accélération et de simplification de l’action publique [Loi ASAP]) was passed in December 2020, with the aim of \textit{clarifying regulations for professionals and providing them with new opportunities}, including increased capacity for micro-centres and simplified cover arrangements and various new options for childminders, including working from outside their own home.\textsuperscript{182} The law also stipulates the requirement of regular, formal sessions for professionals to reflect on their practices,\textsuperscript{183} although one interviewee raised concerns about both the financial feasibility and the adequacy of this measure in practice.\textsuperscript{184} In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, compensation was made available for those ECEC professionals, including childminders, who were unable to work.\textsuperscript{185}

Finally, one interviewee expressed concern around the fact that primary and preschool teachers receive the same training despite having very different jobs, with no indication of any shift occurring in this area.\textsuperscript{186} However, the Ministry of National Education has highlighted the importance of covering more of the specificities of teaching preschool and the needs of children in this age group into teacher training.\textsuperscript{187} The Ministry also recognised the important role of early years assistants (\textit{agents territoriaux spécialisés des écoles maternelles [ATSEM]}), the inadequacy of the initial and CPD training that they currently receive, and the need for teachers themselves to receive training around how to work with early years assistants most effectively.\textsuperscript{188}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{175} Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
\textsuperscript{176} RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020.
\textsuperscript{177} Giampino (2016).
\textsuperscript{178} France Stratégie (2021a).
\textsuperscript{179} Eurochild (2021a).
\textsuperscript{180} Delhon (2021).
\textsuperscript{181} Delhon (2021).
\textsuperscript{182} Secrétariat d’état chargé de l’enfance et des familles (2020).
\textsuperscript{183} Secrétariat d’état chargé de l’enfance et des familles (2020).
\textsuperscript{184} RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-1S) on 12 November 2021.
\textsuperscript{185} France Stratégie (2021b).
\textsuperscript{186} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
\textsuperscript{187} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a).
\textsuperscript{188} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a).
\end{footnotesize}
2.3.2. Measures to support access to early childhood education and care for disadvantaged families

As outlined in Section 2.1.2, children from disadvantaged background are less likely than their peers from non-disadvantaged backgrounds to attend formal childcare services, for a variety of financial and/or cultural reasons. However, interviewees have noted a recent political shift towards optimising access to these services as a way of combating inequality and cycles of poverty. This follows a much longer-established policy that has aimed to improve provision of ECEC services in socially and economically disadvantaged regions.

From 2013, the government has sought to ensure that at least 10 per cent of childcare service places are reserved for children living below the poverty line. This target has been reinforced as part of the counter-poverty strategy. In September 2018, as part of the counter-poverty strategy, the government also announced the intention to create a further 300 childcare centres for occupational integration (crèches à vocation d’insertion professionnelle [AVIP]) by 2020, to improve job-seekers’ access to childcare, although concerns have been raised around the levels of awareness of this option among eligible families. Nonetheless, as of the end of 2020, 144 childcare centres had engaged with the AVIP approach, as compared with only 42 as of 2018. The CNAF is in the process of monitoring the rates of care and return to employment among participating parents in relation to this measure.

In response to the First 1000 Days report, the government committed to increasing childcare provision for atypical hours and needs. In order to encourage greater transparency, the government and the French mayoral association (Association des maires de France et des presidents d’intercommunalité [AMF]) published a guide for local authorities around allocating childcare places, including a methodology and tools for creating criteria and organising the attribution process.

Various financial supports were also put in place to encourage genuinely equal access to childcare provision. The ‘social diversity’ bonus (bonus ‘mixité sociale’), introduced as part of the counter-poverty strategy, provides funding to childcare centres where family contribution amounts are lowest, in order to neutralise the financial impact of taking in lower-income families for the childcare centres. Some critics of the bonus have argued, however, that this move follows more a logic of ‘ghettoisation’

---

189 De Bodman et al. (2017); CAF (2017).
190 RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020, an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020 and the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
191 Armand & Gille (2006).
192 Legros (2014).
193 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020b).
194 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
195 Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
196 France Stratégie (2021c).
197 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a).
198 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021c).
199 Dubos (2020).
Holistic early education and care

than one of equality, and that it does not represent a true incentive for greater social diversity. As of March 2021, the measure had almost achieved its objective of 90,000 places benefiting from the bonus by 2022, and a CNAF study was introduced in 2019 to monitor the relationship between the measure and the proportion of children living in situations of poverty within the relevant childcare settings in childcare centres. A ‘regional’ bonus (bonus ‘territoire’), likewise established as part of the counter-poverty strategy, provides financial assistance for the creation of childcare centres in the most disadvantaged areas. The bonus was increased in 2021 to accelerate progress towards greater regional equality.

In 2019, a new financial measure was introduced to facilitate access to childminders for families in a situation of financial precarity. This – along with other recent measures relating to childminders – is significant in a context where collective childcare has tended to dominate initiatives and reforms. Resistance to such measures among childminders has been noted, however, due both to social class anxieties from the parent-employers and to prejudices from the childminders regarding disadvantaged children being more difficult to manage.

Moreover, it is much more difficult to address inequalities in childminder childcare, because childminders cannot be obliged to follow certain quotas in the way childcare centres are, as childminders are not employed by the state. This is significant when we consider that childminders are the most commonly used form of formal childcare.

Finally, the counter-poverty strategy launched an additional measure in 2021, Childcare for All (Accueil pour tous), which aims to promote innovative initiatives to support access to both childcare centres and childminders for the most vulnerable families in disadvantaged regions. As of October 2021, 21 such projects had been funded.

Measures have also been introduced to encourage preschool attendance among these vulnerable populations. Two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are given priority access to preschools under the 2015 priority education reform, and the lowering of the compulsory school age to three years has been performed with the explicit aim of reducing inequalities that begin in early childhood, as discussed above.

In addition, certain measures seek to assist children from disadvantaged backgrounds

---

200 Guernalec-Levy (2019); RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
201 RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
202 France Stratégie (2021c).
203 Lelièvre (2018a).
204 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021c).
205 Lelièvre (2018b).
206 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
207 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
208 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
209 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
210 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021c).
211 Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
to thrive in their early years of schooling, including a 2019 ruling to reduce the number of students per class from 20 to 12 students in the final year of preschool. By the start of the 2021–2022 school year, this measure had been applied in 100 per cent of preschools in certain disadvantaged areas (zones d’éducation prioritaire), reaching 330,000 children. One interviewee highlighted this measure as a key indicator of a desire for genuine change in this area. However, a received OECD report observed that the 70 per cent of disadvantaged children who are not enrolled in schools in officially disadvantaged areas will not see the effects of this measure.

Children with disabilities have also been the subject of additional measures and support for both childcare and preschool. A ‘disability inclusion’ bonus (bonus inclusion handicap) was created to provide one quarter of childcare centres with financial aid to assist them in supporting disabled children. It has been observed, however, that this initiative is not highly incentivising for centres because it is provided after the fact, and that it is limited in that it does not apply to childminders, who are the most prevalent form of childcare in some regions.

As of May 2021, childcare professionals have been permitted to administer treatment or medication, upon parental request, to children in their care. The 2020 ASAP law also established additional support for both childcare centres and childminders in relation to child health. Similarly, the 2019 school reform law sought to make education more inclusive for disabled children by, for example, creating a Departmental Service for Inclusive Schooling (Service départemental de l’école inclusive [SDEI]) in each department, dedicated to ensuring handicapped children get an equal educational experience.

While it appears that the government is seeking to give greater recognition to the diversity and plurality of children in the provision of care, various experts are still calling for more support for families with specific vulnerabilities, such as disability, premature birth, perinatal depression, domestic violence and/or extreme poverty, as well as a greater emphasis in training for professionals around early identification and intervention for children with additional needs.

---

213 Vie publique (2019).
214 Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
215 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
216 OECD (2020).
217 Dubos (2020).
218 Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).
219 Vie publique (2021a).
220 Secrétariat d’état chargé de l’enfance et des familles (2020).
221 Vie publique (2019).
222 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
223 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a); Eurochild (2021a).
224 HCFEA (2020).
2.3.3. Measures to support parents’ knowledge and skills around holistic early childhood development

While measures to support parenting tend to be incoherent and little known,\textsuperscript{225} there have been several new strategies and policies to support carers and parents with ECD provision, with spending in this area twice what it was ten years previously.\textsuperscript{226}

The 2018–2019 National Strategy for Parenting Support (Stratégie nationale de soutien à la parentalité) under the counter-poverty strategy had the objective of ensuring that parenthood advice and guidance are made more visible and accessible, as well as providing additional support mechanisms to parents throughout the different stages of parenthood.\textsuperscript{227} A consultation for a National Charter for Parenting Support (Charte nationale de soutien à la parentalité) was also launched, in November 2021.\textsuperscript{228} In addition, in response to the First 1000 Days report’s recommendations around extending and improving the parity of parental leave,\textsuperscript{229} paternity leave provision was extended from 11 to 25 days (seven of which are obligatory), in July 2021, and initiatives have been established to shift cultures within companies around taking parental leave.\textsuperscript{230} The First Steps (Les Premiers pas) seminar (see Section 3.1) nonetheless argued that more needs to be done to improve parental leave pay and increase the proportion of families with a child aged zero to three years who use parental leave from the current 10 per cent, as well as to make its use more egalitarian between both parents and place the child’s wellbeing and development at the heart of relevant policy.\textsuperscript{231}

Efforts have also been made to facilitate access to information and support for parents. A booklet was released in 2017 by the Ministry of Health and Solidarity, offering advice to parents on such themes as nutrition, sleep and screen use and, overall, advocating for compassionate parenting.\textsuperscript{232} The CNAF has also worked to make parents more aware of the childcare options available,\textsuperscript{233} and the 2020 ASAP law sought to facilitate access to childcare for parents by lifting barriers to atypical hours of childcare and improving the provision of information around the availability of local childcare.\textsuperscript{234} Work is similarly being done to give parents a more important role in preschools,\textsuperscript{235} in particular by defining an area in every school reserved for parents, where they can meet and support each other, and through creating a recognised place for

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[225] France Stratégie (2021a); RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
\item[226] France Stratégie (2021a).
\item[228] Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021d).
\item[229] Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
\item[230] Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a); Eurochild (2021a).
\item[231] France Stratégie (2021a).
\item[232] Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2017); RAND Europe interview with a coordinator at COFRADE (int-2) on 12 November 2018.
\item[233] RAND Europe interview with an advisor for the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-8) and the Chief of Staff in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-9) on 29 May 2020.
\item[234] Secrétariat d’état chargé de l’enfance et des familles (2020).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
parents in the functioning of the school.\textsuperscript{236} As of December 2021, however, interviewees were critical of the level of parental engagement and support provided by preschools, as well as the limited training for teachers around engaging with diverse populations.\textsuperscript{237}

In addition, efforts have been made to provide parents with spaces where they can access community support.\textsuperscript{238} The counter-poverty strategy is seeking to create an additional 300 social centres by 2022, with a focus on disadvantaged areas.\textsuperscript{238} As of October 2021, 245 social centres had been created since 2018, with the number of disadvantaged areas without a social centre dropping from 375 to 130 as a result.\textsuperscript{239} Similarly, the former childminder community centres (relais assistants maternels [RAM]) have been renamed early childhood centres (relais petite enfance [RPE]), in an effort to open them up to parents as a place for information, advice and guidance towards further relevant services.\textsuperscript{240} Local authorities are also drawing on the support of non-governmental bodies to gain a better understanding of the area and of the actions they can take.\textsuperscript{241}

Finally, in response to the First 1000 Days report, the government committed to strengthening support for parents over the peri-natal period. In addition to early prenatal appointments (entretiens prénataux précoces [EPP]), made obligatory in May 2020, emphasis will be placed on identifying any potential family vulnerabilities as early as possible, promoting carer-child attachment and providing ongoing support once the baby has returned home, particularly in situations of vulnerability, including post-natal depression.\textsuperscript{242} A post-natal medical appointment was also made obligatory as part of this action.\textsuperscript{243} One interviewee, however, criticised the report for calling for the creation of parenting support when these services are already provided by the Mother and Child Protection Service (Service de protection maternelle et infantile [PMI]), which is already suffering from high attrition rates and limited resources.\textsuperscript{244}

Nonetheless, according to one interviewee, support for parents remains fragmented due to regional disparities, and there is less awareness among parents in more disadvantaged areas with regards to the importance of preschool and ECEC services for children’s development, which is also a factor in driving some of the inequalities previously mentioned.\textsuperscript{245} Furthermore, the creation of parenting support measures relies on an alignment of priorities across multiple sectors.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{236} RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{237} RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{238} RAND Europe interview with an advisor for the Délégation Interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-8) and the Chief of Staff in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-9) on 29 May 2020; Service France (2018).
\item \textsuperscript{239} Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (2021).
\item \textsuperscript{240} France Stratégie (2021a).
\item \textsuperscript{241} RAND Europe interview with an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{242} Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021a).
\item \textsuperscript{243} Eurochild (2021c).
\item \textsuperscript{244} RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{245} RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018.
\end{itemize}
local actors, who can themselves be subject to various constraints.\textsuperscript{246}

Moreover, measures that do exist to support parents and parenting tend to be little used\textsuperscript{247} and there is evidence to suggest that parents do not always welcome external parenting advice, with over 50 per cent of respondents in one 2020 study reporting that they would not like any assistance in managing their role as a parent or their relationship with the school (although the proportion was lower than it had been in 2004).\textsuperscript{248} Similarly, 46 per cent of parents said that choosing a childcare service that can advise you on your role as parent was ‘of little or no importance’ when making this decision.\textsuperscript{249} More than 50 per cent, however, did desire assistance in questions of health and family rupture, and almost half desired assistance with ECD.\textsuperscript{250}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{246} France Stratégie (2021a).
  \item \textsuperscript{247} France Stratégie (2021a).
  \item \textsuperscript{248} DREES (2020).
  \item \textsuperscript{249} Laporte (2019).
  \item \textsuperscript{250} DREES (2020).
\end{itemize}
3 Broader trends around holistic early childhood development

This section outlines some of the key trends that the research team observed in relation to discourse and actions relating to holistic ECD and ECEC within French politics and society as a whole over the period 2017–2021.

3.1. Progress towards greater emphasis on holistic early childhood development

3.1.1. Increased emphasis on holistic development in childcare settings

Research published in this period argued that the theme of ‘early childhood’ in general is attracting increasing interest both among researchers and in the public space.\(^{251}\) Moreover, the stakeholders consulted for this study indicated a general perception of there being a strong political and societal will and understanding regarding the importance of focusing on ECD, including on socio-emotional development specifically, at this early age.\(^{252}\) Several individuals interviewed in 2021 reported thinking that a number of elements are now contributing to a time of positive change for ECEC and ECD.\(^{253}\)

One of the longstanding government objectives for childcare provision has been to help parents reconcile their private life and professional activity.\(^{254}\) Over the past two decades, however, a shift in attitude has been observed, with increasing attention being placed on the benefits of this care for children’s development.\(^{255}\) Amendments made to the Code for Social Action and Families (Code de l’action sociale et des familles) as part of the 2021 Family Services Order (Ordonnance relative aux services aux familles) stipulate that the role of childcare professionals is to ensure the health; safety; wellbeing; and physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive

---

251 Dequiré & Gastaut (2019).
252 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020, a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020, an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020, an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020, a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020 and an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
253 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021, a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and the programme director at the Break Poverty Foundation (int-18) on 25 November 2021.
254 Dubos (2020); RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-7) on 11 December 2018.
255 RAND Europe interview with a coordinator at COFRADE (int-2) on 12 November 2018, an academic (int-5) on 14 November 2018, a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and the programme director at the Break Poverty Foundation (int-18) on 25 November 2021.
and social development of the children in their care. However, this is only one of six missions, with the others relating to addressing both gender-based and social inequalities, promoting education, supporting children with disabilities and facilitating parents’ work–life balance. Childcare services consequently juggle a number of responsibilities, and some experts have criticised the tendency for their role in facilitating work–life balance and combatting poverty to eclipse objectives relating to childhood development. One interviewee noted, for example, that during the Covid-19 crisis, media attention around ECEC, in a purely economic rather than educational debate, focused on whether childcare centres should be open or not based on the needs of the parents to return to work, and not from the perspective of whether the children have a need to return to learning and socialising. Nonetheless, one interviewee noted that the government’s positioning of childcare at the heart of the fight against social inequalities indicates recognition of its importance for children’s development.

One interviewee noted that there was much more talk around early years in the political sphere (including among local authorities) between 2017 and 2021 than had been the case during the 2012–2017 presidency, and that these discussions show a greater concern for both the quality of care and the role of parents. The interviewee argued that this was due at least in part to a greater focus on combatting social inequalities and the search for ever-earlier interventions in this respect, fed by the regular OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. The interviewee also noted the simultaneous growing emphasis on the role of the family and on the importance of the individual, as well as the emerging movement of children’s rights. Another interviewee noted that 2021 marked a key turning point for political recognition of the significance of the zero to three age group for a variety of issues, as well as the role public policy can play in relation to this. In addition to the new policies and measures highlighted above, there have been several less formal indications that this stage of life is gaining notable attention in the political sphere. The First Steps seminars were launched by the CNAF, France Stratégie and the HCFEA in December 2020 to bring together academics, policymakers, practitioners and other ECD stakeholders with the aim of conceptualising an integrated, holistic approach to early years public policy. The participation of the State Secretary for Children and Family alongside France’s national coordinator EPEPE in Eurochild’s recent conference on tackling disadvantage in early childhood as part of the First Years First Priority campaign – the
only national government representative to

do so266 – similarly points towards such a
trend. This is an important shift considering
that in 2018 one interviewee observed
that the government remained focused on
preschool at the expense of the years 0–3.267
The Ministry for Education likewise continues
to show a growing political will to recognise
the importance of preschool education,268
particularly in relation to addressing social
inequalities, as indicated by the numerous
measures and policies outlined above.

A number of interviewees have, however,
indicated a discrepancy or delay between
intentions and actions in ECEC governmental
policy,269 with one interviewee even suggesting
that they did not think early years policy is a
priority for the government.270 In their report for
Eurochild, EPEPE called for an acceleration to
implementing existing ECD policies at national,
regional and local levels,271 and one interviewee
noted that while France tends to be very good
at introducing legislation, the government
is historically rather weaker at introducing
policies and evaluating their efficacy.272 More
specifically, it was observed that very little
scaling up is occurring, with inadvertent
duplication between areas as a result of the
lack of models being deployed more broadly.273
Even for public policy actions that have been
implemented, experts have indicated that the
visible impact on young children and their
family remains limited, particularly among the
most vulnerable.274

In relation to supporting holistic ECD
specifically, the significance of the First 1000
Days report lies particularly in the emphasis
it placed on socio-emotional development
alongside the cognitive and psychomotor
aspects, explicitly envisaging equality as a
matter of mental and social health, as well
as physical.275 The report also specifically
highlighted the role of childcare services in
supporting these forms of development, in
addition to combatting social inequalities, and
made a number of recommendations in this
respect.276 For example, the report highlighted
the importance of low child-to-adult ratios
for both the professionals’ wellbeing and
the child’s development, and recommended
attachment-informed practices in childcare
centres to encourage the development of a

---

266 Eurochild (2021b).
267 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018.
268 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018.
269 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020, a general delegate at the
FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020, a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020, an advisor for the Délégation
interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-8) and the Chief of Staff in the Délégation
interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-9) on 29 May 2020 and the programme director at
the Break Poverty Foundation (int-18) on 25 November 2021.
270 RAND Europe interview with an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
271 Eurochild (2021a).
272 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
273 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
274 Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).
275 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a); RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation
interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
276 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).
secure relationship between each child and one adult in particular.\footnote{277} The First Steps seminars likewise placed emphasis on the importance of childcare in developing a child’s cognitive and socio-emotional competences\footnote{278} and the National Childcare Charter emphasises that the physical, cognitive, affective and social elements of children’s development are indissociable and constantly interacting.\footnote{279} One interviewee noted that there is notable demand for training and teaching days for childcare staff on themes around understanding the emotions of young children and that the new obligation for a formal period of reflection on staff practices will encourage positive interactions and emotional responses around the children in their care.\footnote{280}

The government is, however, still placing emphasis on the role of childcare in creating an appetite for learning and reading from a very young age\footnote{281} (in addition to physical and cognitive health). The counter-poverty strategy has, for example, also been criticised for focusing primarily on language development and ‘fundamental skills’ (reading and maths) in the early years, in place of socio-emotional competences.\footnote{282} This is seen, for example, in the emphasis the counter-poverty strategy placed on the Parler Bambin language programme.\footnote{283} In addition, the counter-poverty strategy’s CPD training plan does not accord explicit attention to socio-emotional development in any of its seven modules, although the training is intended to help professionals support children in all their emotional, social, cultural, artistic, cognitive and sensorial needs.\footnote{284} One interviewee also noted that while the data collection for evaluating the measures asked teachers about the impact the measures had on their wellbeing, the children involved were not asked the same thing.\footnote{285} Another expert observed that some ECEC professionals have also found themselves in a difficult position where their often very radical stance regarding the importance of focusing on the children’s socio-emotional development is being challenged by a desire to legitimise their profession through more school-like pedagogical approaches, particularly in the teaching of language.\footnote{286}

3.1.2. Continued focus on language and maths for preschools

While in his previous mandate the President explained his objective to create a school where the ‘cognitive and affective complement each other’ [translation by the author],\footnote{287} the culture in preschools appears to be moving...
in a different direction,\textsuperscript{288} with the focus very much remaining on academic success.\textsuperscript{289} The government rationale for the recent amendments to the preschool curriculum stated that preschool does not follow the primary school model, in that it emphasises the close link between children's psychological, motor and cognitive development and the emotional relationships they have with their family, friends and teachers. Nonetheless, the central mission of preschool was still identified as preparing children for primary school and the acquisition of reading, writing and counting skills, and a respect for others, with an emphasis on language acquisition in terms of syntax, etc. (\textit{langage}), not simply self-expression (\textit{langue}).\textsuperscript{290} In a formal communication in 2020, the government emphasised the status of preschool as school in its own right, and signalled a greater focus on testing for pupils in this age group.\textsuperscript{291} Only two short paragraphs in the 50-page document address emotional development, and then only to emphasise the importance of positive, secure relationships with adults for the child's language development, memory and willingness and capacity to learn.\textsuperscript{292} Moreover, while research has emphasised the key role preschool plays in providing a space for children to learn the dialectic between the individual and the group,\textsuperscript{293} the focus of the communication remained on what the child as an individual is thinking and doing. Similarly, on the Ministry's website, preschool is described first and foremost as 'an essential step for ensuring pupils' academic success.'\textsuperscript{294} One interviewee argued that while, in theory, more attention is being accorded to the socio-emotional elements, \textit{France remains a country in which numeracy and literacy are of higher priority} than everything else.\textsuperscript{295} This is exacerbated by the fact that teachers are often not trained in areas of socio-emotional development\textsuperscript{296} and that evaluations and testing are still exclusively concerned with the development of language and maths.\textsuperscript{297} Some interviewees noted that while training for preschool teachers is starting to address such elements as ECD, attachment and holistic education,\textsuperscript{298} balancing these alongside the increased focus on maths and language is not well articulated and is hampered by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{288} RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{289} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{290} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a); RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{291} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a); RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{292} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020a); RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{293} Zotian (2021).
\item \textsuperscript{294} Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020c).
\item \textsuperscript{295} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020 and 22 October 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{296} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020 and 22 October 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{297} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021. See, for example: Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports (2020d).
\item \textsuperscript{298} RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
\end{itemize}
a rigid institutional model. The relatively high number of children per preschool class as compared with other countries has also been highlighted as this kind of traditional school set-up can be limiting on the kinds of relational activities involved in socio-emotional development practices.

Some have argued, moreover, that the law lowering the compulsory school age to three has represented a move away from a concern for socio-emotional development (see Section 2.2.2). These critics see this new law as the transformation of preschool into a place of (academic) education (instruction), where pride of place is given to phonology, vocabulary and maths. The educational guidelines issued for the start of the 2019 school year (circulaire de rentrée) were also seen by some to be knocking aside the valorisation of arts and sports that is found in the preschool curriculum published in 2015, while making no mention of any kind of emotional development. While social development is mentioned in the new curriculum, the objective to ‘prepare children to live well with others through learning the rules of collective life’ is more centred on compliant behaviour than on personal development. This has led to concerns around the ‘schoolification’ of preschool through applying the same pedagogical approaches as are used in primary school, particularly given that training for preschool teachers is the same as for primary school ones.

### 3.2. Challenges hampering improvements in early years policy and practice

Even once widespread recognition of the importance of this period has been achieved, a number of challenges for translating this into concrete actions will remain.

#### 3.2.1. A dual, fragmented and decentralised governance system

The decentralised and dual ministerial system was widely reported by interviewees and in expert commentary to create inconsistency in the way in which ECEC services are managed for children. In addition to the ministerial division (see Section 2.1.1), responsibilities for standard setting and curriculum development are primarily determined by the national government for preschools and by local authorities for childcare services. Similarly, responsibility for financing childcare centres is determined by a variety of actors, including the CAF and local authorities, while the financing of public preschools is primarily managed nationally. The existence of these different

---

299 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
300 France Stratégie (2021a).
301 RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.
305 Service Public (2019).
306 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
307 RAND Europe interview with an academic (int-5) on 14 November 2018 and a policymaker (int-6) on 16 November 2018.
308 OECD (2016).
309 OECD (2016).
governance systems creates a disconnect between the childcare services (up to age two or three) and preschool (between ages two or three and six), due to a lack of coordination and ‘educational continuum’ between the services and the ministries. This has resulted in a transition between childcare and preschool that is, according to some, very poor.

Similarly, there is no single national strategy for the early years to support a holistic government approach, with young children remaining caught at the intersection of a range of policies (educational, social, health, childcare, family, rights), each of which depends on multiple actors at different governance levels and a range of funding sources. This leads to inconsistencies and duplications in addressing different aspects of ECD, particularly among vulnerable groups, further exacerbated by the lack of continuity between policies relating to childcare and preschool ages. Moreover, one interviewee noted the challenge of introducing good practice in ECD from other countries, such as Finland, when the education system in France is so different in terms of the distribution of responsibility between various bodies and levels of authority. Another interviewee also evoked the challenge of ensuring that government initiatives are not simply duplicating work that is already provided by non-governmental actors. While work is being done to ensure that government initiatives coordinate with rather than duplicate existing initiatives, this lack of coordination appears to remain a prevalent issue. One interviewee argued that this situation will never change and simply demands a national-level administration that is sufficiently agile to create links across all these different actors and sectors.

Even in relation to childcare specifically, policy governance is fragmented across a range of actors (local authorities, associations of municipalities, departmental councils, CAFs and the Agricultural Social Security Mutual Fund [Caisse de mutualité sociale agricole (CMSA)], state and private actors), with no clear authority or overall accountability, supported by a complex funding system. There is no single body with a legal responsibility to ensure the quantity and quality of childcare provision, nor is there any legal obligation for certain childcare

310 Bérard-Bergery & Lelièvre (2018); OECD (2020); RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021, a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.

311 France Stratégie (2021a); Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021); RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.

312 Eurochild (2021a).

313 France Stratégie (2021a); RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020, a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and a policymaker on 8 December 2021; Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).

314 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021 and a policymaker on 8 December 2021; Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).

315 France Stratégie (2021a).

316 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-13) on 28 May 2020.

317 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.

318 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.

319 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.

320 France Stratégie (2021a).
provision targets to be met. One local authority representative argued that funding for childcare is, consequently, not considered a priority and that the national objectives for creating more childcare places remain dependent on the goodwill of local authorities or private providers expanding provision. Further inconsistencies affect childcare services due to the lack of harmonisation in practices across the country. While the National Childcare Charter, adherence to which was made a legal obligation in September 2021, establishes the key principles according to which formal childcare provision must be run, each childcare centre is responsible for developing its own pedagogical project to be approved by the departmental authorities for maternal and child protection. Moreover, different regions are able to adopt different practices in relation to childcare services, leading to disparities between local authorities in terms of the quality of provision. This means that even if the provision of childcare across the regions is roughly even – for example, one study reported that only 4 per cent of families declared there were no childcare centres or childminders near them – there remains a risk of variation in the quality of the services on offer.

While the national governance of preschools limits such variation in practice and provision, there do exist certain risks of regional inequalities in quality of care stemming from an arrangement where the municipality, and not the state, is responsible for financing material expenses. Interviewees have, however, mentioned that initiatives are being considered to harmonise these practices at the national level, to simplify norms and regulations, create a better synergy between childcare centres and preschools, and facilitate access to information and coordination of the various stakeholders involved in ECEC. In relation to childcare policy specifically, one interviewee observed that, over the course of 2021, a context has successfully been developed for thinking about this period of life and the actors involved in a more integrated way, largely through the First 1000 Days initiative (see Section 2.2.3). The 2021 Family Services Order also instated the obligation for all

321 France Stratégie (2021a); RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021, an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021, an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021 and a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.

322 RAND Europe interview with an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.

323 France Stratégie (2021a).

324 Légifrance (2021).


326 Hbila (2015); RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 7 November 2018 and a coordinator at COFRADE (int-2) on 12 November 2018.

327 Garnier (2019).

328 Laporte (2019).

329 Eurydice (2019).

330 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020.

331 Hbila (2015); RAND Europe interview with a coordinator at COFRADE (int-2) on 12 November 2018 and a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 7 November 2018, Ministère des Familles, de l’Enfance et des Droits des femmes (2017); RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.

332 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
départements to establish a Departmental Committee for Family Services (Comité départemental des services aux familles), with the responsibility of coordinating and creating dialogue between the various actors working in the early years (ages zero to three only), developing a six-year departmental plan for family services and implementing the First 1000 Days project at both the departmental and local level. In addition, the first Conference for Families (Conférence des familles) in 15 years was organised in 2021, with the ambition of bringing together the diverse range of actors who work to support families in order to discuss the future of public actions in the area, with contributions from a number of ministries, covering the remits of education, health, economy, work and equality. Coalitions of relevant actors (cités éducatives) are also now being created around the preschool period, and one interviewee indicated the Ministry of National Education’s prioritisation of working in dialogue with other ministries, interministerial experts and non-governmental specialists on questions relating to the early years.

Some progress is also being made in relation to the childcare–preschool split. Actors concerned with both childcare and preschool levels of ECEC participated in the First Steps seminar, organised by the CNAF, France Stratégie and the HCFEA to reflect on issues relating to the early years, and there is some indication that a greater understanding of the early years period is spreading into teacher training. The Ministry of National Education is, however, seeking to build a greater link with the PMIs, as well as improve training and raise the necessary qualifications for early years assistants, who work in both childcare and preschools and who represent a key point of connection between the two. Any kind of combined training for both childcare and preschool professionals remains a challenge, however, due to their different statutes, institutes and objectives. Moreover, initiatives to facilitate transition from childcare into preschool remain highly localised, and one interviewee from the Ministry of National Education recognised the need to do better in this respect. Another interviewee observed in 2021 that a distinct discontinuity between the functions of childcare and school around

333 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021; France Stratégie (2021a); Vie publique (2021b); Secrétariat d’État chargé de l’enfance et des familles (2020).
334 Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2021f).
335 Lelièvre (2021a).
336 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
337 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
338 Eurochild (2021a).
339 France Stratégie (2021a).
340 France Stratégie (2021a).
341 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
342 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
343 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
344 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021 and a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
345 RAND Europe interview with a General Inspector for the Ministry of National Education (int-20) on 7 December 2021.
health and education, respectively, still remains.\textsuperscript{346}

For one interviewee, a major difficulty for improving ECEC provision lies in the discrepancy between the norms fixed by the state and the recommendations determined in response to these norms by the départements. This means that when the national line is unclear, different interpretations can emerge. This is particularly difficult for childcare companies with centres in multiple departments. Moreover, this means that the push from many ECEC professionals for a national childcare project with a national training policy is met with regional resistance.\textsuperscript{347} Indeed, it has been argued more broadly that decentralisation has led to a fragmentation of the French politico-administrative system at the local level, resulting in less planning at the central level and a certain disengagement from the state from public policy areas.\textsuperscript{348}

Another interviewee highlighted the challenge presented by regional inequalities, in particular, the great diversity of problems facing the ECEC sector depending on the region. In some areas, there are fewer and fewer children, leading schools to close, while in others there are too many children and the class sizes are too large. Any ‘solution’ must, consequently, be adaptable to a huge diversity of situations.\textsuperscript{349} This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many governmental initiatives in the ECEC area rely on the cooperation of regional authorities for their implementation\textsuperscript{350} and by the unequal financial capacity of different regions.\textsuperscript{351}

Even at the very local level, there are challenges relating to the absence of cultures of cooperation among schools, families and local social actors, even when all parties are motivated by the same objectives,\textsuperscript{352} and non-governmental actors struggle to coordinate their actions due to limited capacity.\textsuperscript{353} Moreover, one interviewee reported an apparent disinterest within many local authorities for creating childcare centres.\textsuperscript{354} This is particularly detrimental for more disadvantaged populations, as municipality-run centres tend to be the most accessible form of formal childcare.\textsuperscript{355} Finally, shrinking state subsidies and endowments around childcare place significant financial burden on local authorities,\textsuperscript{356} and there are poor systems in place for allocating childcare centre provision.\textsuperscript{357}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{346} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{347} RAND Europe interview with a general delegate at the FFEC (int-1) on 18 May 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{348} Loughlin & Seiler (2001).
\item \textsuperscript{349} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{350} RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021; France Stratégie (2021a).
\item \textsuperscript{351} France Stratégie (2021a).
\item \textsuperscript{352} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 26 May 2020.
\item \textsuperscript{353} RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{354} RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{355} RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{356} RAND Europe interview with an early years coordinator for a local authority (int-19) on 6 December 2021.
\item \textsuperscript{357} RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
\end{itemize}
3.2.2. Translating policy into professional practice

One interviewee pointed out that while recent governmental reforms are creating real change, there are a number of longstanding problems on the ground, such as an intensification of workloads and poor child-to-staff ratios, which hamper what these reforms can achieve in practice. Moreover, this interviewee argued that problems with recruitment and attrition due to poor working conditions and pay result in understaffing issues that undermine the potential of such government initiatives as an increase in childcare provision and the National Childcare Charter, while the lack of stability and high turnover within childcare centres negatively impacts the children's experiences of attachment. The First Steps seminar likewise concluded that progress in childcare quality is currently hampered by the unattractiveness of the profession, as well as the extreme variation in the level and nature of training required for exercising the profession. One interviewee argued, however, that the unattractiveness of the profession was less of a problem than the small number of places available for receiving the necessary training compared with the candidates available, due to poor funding at the regional level. The fact that the population of ECEC professionals in France is relatively older also means that these professionals’ initial training is unlikely to have incorporated such elements; if they have not received any CPD in recent years, they are unlikely to have been trained in supporting socio-emotional ECD in much detail.

Another interviewee argued that the take-up and translation of government policy into practice by ECEC professionals is hampered by the tendency to exclude these professionals from working groups and decision making processes in this area. This unexpected resistance among policy beneficiaries was also observed in relation to attempts to promote schooling from age two for disadvantaged families. Similarly, another interviewee emphasised barriers around the lack of awareness of ECEC provision and support more generally, with childcare centres needing to actively seek out families, particularly disadvantaged ones, that could benefit from their services. This same interviewee also mentioned barriers of social prejudice against the use of ‘social services’, such as public childcare centres.

3.3. Developments in research and evaluations around early childhood development

While research, data and evaluations in this field remain limited, there are signs that progress is being made in terms of recognising their importance, even if action continues to lag behind intention.

---

358 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
359 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021. A similar point was also made by a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) in an interview with RAND Europe on 19 November 2021.
360 France Stratégie (2021a).
361 RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.
362 RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.
363 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
364 RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 May 2020.
365 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
3.3.1. Research and data on ECD and ECEC

Numerous experts expressed the view that, while research has played a key role in prompting a greater focus on ECD and a broad consensus about its importance in recent years,\textsuperscript{366} scientific knowledge about this period remains insufficient.\textsuperscript{367} Interviewees have tended to emphasise the limited data available on the zero to three age group,\textsuperscript{368} beyond such simple statistics as the types of childcare available and the number of children per class.\textsuperscript{369} An interviewee also noted that there is a lower quality and quantity of data available for childcare services in particular, as compared with preschools.\textsuperscript{370} Reasons given for this include the fact that they are not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry for Education and that the available data is not updated every year.\textsuperscript{371} There is even less data available on the families whose children are enrolled in childcare centres.\textsuperscript{372} Since 2019, however, the CNAF has started collecting data from childcare centres that provides an annual portrait of the population of children drawing on formal childcare provision,\textsuperscript{373} and the State Secretary for Children and Families has recognised the need for public statistics on family- and child-related policies.\textsuperscript{374}

Furthermore, there are few studies on the importance of the socio-emotional development of children in France and thus very little data on the provision and level of socio-emotional development in children, as well as little research and data for so-called non-cognitive indicators in France.\textsuperscript{375} Similarly, research on the impact of Covid-19 on very young children and their families is extremely limited,\textsuperscript{376} with one study on the impact of mask wearing in childcare centres forced to self-fund so as to be able to respond in a timely manner.\textsuperscript{377} Another interviewee noted that while some research has been carried out around ECEC professionals’ knowledge and practices, there is still not enough such research.\textsuperscript{378} This creates a reliance on English-language research, which, the interviewee argued, is not easily transferable to the French context.\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{366} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021 and a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.

\textsuperscript{367} RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.

\textsuperscript{368} Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021); RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.

\textsuperscript{369} RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 19 November 2021.

\textsuperscript{370} RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.

\textsuperscript{371} RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.

\textsuperscript{372} CAF (2021).

\textsuperscript{373} Eurochild (2021c); Eurochild (2021a).

\textsuperscript{374} These include, for example: Bracha et al. (2007), Baurain & Nader-Grosbois (2011), and Giampino (2016); RAND Europe interview with a senior researcher at INED (int-4) on 14 November 2018; Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé (2020a).

\textsuperscript{375} Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021); RAND Europe interview with a developmental psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.

\textsuperscript{376} RAND Europe interview with a development psychologist (int-15) on 12 November 2021.

\textsuperscript{377} RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021.

\textsuperscript{378} RAND Europe interview with the founder and director of GIS BECO (int-14) on 20 October 2021.
Interviewees attributed this lack of research at least in part to the ongoing problem of insufficient funding and calls for projects.\(^{380}\) including among philanthropic actors, who remain quite sparse in what is seen as a specialist area.\(^{381}\) This also creates a situation of competitiveness that can discourage young researchers from entering the field.\(^{382}\) A lack of human and material resources for longitudinal studies, a lack of recognition of the importance of this area among some research funders and methodological challenges around assessing socio-emotional as compared with somatic impacts have also been identified as barriers.\(^{383}\)

**Change is, however, starting to occur.** For example, a French longitudinal study of childhood begun in 2011 (Étude Longitudinale Francaise depuis l’Enfance [more commonly known by its acronym, ELFE]) will help provide the data necessary for more interesting studies on ECEC and ECD to be conducted.\(^{384}\) The First Steps initiative has also involved a number of research activities, including a literature review on child development policies, a census of relevant available data, and evaluations of local actions.\(^{385}\) Several quantitative and qualitative studies in the area were carried out to support the 2021 Conference for Families,\(^{386}\) and the government has recently launched a study on the childcare and parenting support needs of families in situations of poverty.\(^{387}\)

The National Agency for Public Health likewise plays an important role in digesting, translating and disseminating for public consumption relevant scientific knowledge relating to this age group.\(^{388}\) There are also indications of philanthropic actors moving into the field as a result of the emerging research.\(^{389}\)

### 3.3.2. Evaluations of policy and practice around ECD and ECEC

**Evaluations focusing on ECD or related policies in France remain rare.**\(^{390}\) with evaluations concerned with parenting support\(^{391}\) and the quality of care,\(^{392}\) pedagogical approaches\(^{393}\) and ECD initiatives\(^{394}\) in childcare particularly lacking. As a result, while there exist numerous interesting local initiatives seeking to support vulnerable children or develop professionals’ skills, they...
tend to be initiated without any scientific basis and with no evaluation of their effectiveness. At times, the very principles behind such initiatives, such as unconditional access, can be perceived as incompatible with a scientific evaluation. The most high-profile evaluation in recent years relating to the early years was the large-scale randomised control trial of the Parler Bambin language programme, which did not identify the predicted impacts.

It has been noted by an academic at the French National Centre for Scientific Research that evaluations of impact within various ECEC services on children's social, emotional and cognitive development are not performed. ECEC services are subject to health and safety inspections, but there is no assessment focused on the evaluation of the effect of ECD on child outcomes. While there is a French centre for evaluation within the youth domain, it does not pertain to children aged three and under, as the centre falls under the Ministry of National Education and Youth. Furthermore, France has elected not to participate in a number of OECD research projects attempting to fill the gap in terms of the impact of educational reforms on children's learning and development.

This context was also echoed in the interviews, with one interviewee in particular stating that France could benefit from developing a culture of impact evaluation in the field. This is of particular relevance because, with no impact evaluations on services or policies, it is not possible to know what works best for children. For example, one interviewee expressed concern that little is known about the possible repercussions that different childcare centre programmes may have on children, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, whether in the short, medium or long term. Acquiring this kind of data would, of course, involve overcoming a number of challenges, including the difficulty of conducting on-the-ground qualitative studies of childcare centres. The limited resources and the constraints imposed by impact measures create significant challenges, exacerbated by the fact that evaluations are not yet very embedded in French administrative culture.

Evaluation of public policy is nonetheless not a new concept in France, and there are indications to suggest that the government is making an effort to improve in this area, with the aim of legitimising public policy and implementation approaches. The

396 RAND Europe interview with the programme director at the Break Poverty Foundation (int-18) on 25 November 2021.
397 Institut des Politiques Publiques (2021).
398 Fougère (2016).
399 OECD (2016).
400 De Bodman et al. (2017).
401 RAND Europe interview with an OECD researcher (int-12) on 27 May 2020.
402 RAND Europe interview with an academic (int-5) on 14 November 2018.
403 RAND Europe interview with the Head of Early Childhood for CNAF (int-23) on 4 August 2020.
404 RAND Europe interview with a researcher for ONAPE (int-11) on 13 May 2020.
405 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
406 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
counter-poverty strategy is being evaluated by France Stratégie, although concerns have been raised around insufficient monitoring and evaluation data, including on the quality of collective childcare provision, a failure to implement measures for long-term impact for the children involved, and a lack of available data for assessing the efficacy of adapting public policy to regional needs to promote equal opportunity. A What Works centre has also been established to track and assess local actions funded by the Counter-Poverty Commissioners, 1,500 of which have been funded since the launch of the counter-poverty strategy, with the ambition of ultimately scaling up successful models. Specific evaluations are in place to assess the effectiveness of AVIPs, the diversity and regional bonuses, and reduced class sizes in certain preschools. The emphasis on evaluation for all projects funded by the Childcare for All initiative will also enable it to act as a pipeline for trialling innovation projects, with the vision of effective ones ultimately being scaled up. One interviewee recognised that while an emphasis had been placed on evaluation as part of the counter-poverty strategy, there was still a lot of progress to be made.

A small number of evaluations are also occurring in relation to the First 1000 Days initiatives, in accordance with the report’s emphasis on the importance of building an early years public policy built on research and evaluation. For example, the large-scale ‘baby box’ trial in 2022 will seek to understand how the initiative works; whether it is feasible on a national level; how it is received by parents and professionals; and what the perceived impacts are on parents’ knowledge, understanding, behaviour and choices. It will also look at how the ‘baby box’ interacts with other First 1000 Days initiatives, in particular the summary booklet, which will be included in the box. Depending on the results of this trial, it is possible that a more long-term impact evaluation will be carried out. In addition, while not involving a specific evaluation, the summary booklet is intended to be a ‘living document’ that will be undergo iterative updates based on consultation with and feedback from parents, professionals and other relevant actors. The calls for proposals

407 France Stratégie (2021c).
408 RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
409 RAND Europe interview with a Counter-Poverty Commissioner (int-16) on 19 November 2021.
410 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
411 Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).
412 Coalition Nationale de la Petite Enfance (2021).
414 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
415 RAND Europe interview with an advisor in the Délégation interministérielle à la prévention et à la lutte contre la pauvreté (int-17) on 23 November 2021.
417 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
418 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
419 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
420 RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
and research programmes associated with the First 1000 Days likewise place emphasis on participatory approaches and evaluations.\textsuperscript{421} and the childcare reform of September 2021 promoted trials in childcare contexts.\textsuperscript{422} There are also evaluation in place on aspects of French policy, such as the financing of additional nursery places.\textsuperscript{423}

Finally, a Council for School Evaluations (Conseil de l’évaluation de l’École) was established in 2019 and is in the process of launching a five-year evaluation of all schools across France, including preschools, among other things in relation to practices promoting socio-emotional development and wellbeing.\textsuperscript{424}

\textsuperscript{421} RAND Europe interview with a policymaker (int-21) on 8 December 2021.
\textsuperscript{422} Lelièvre (2021b).
\textsuperscript{423} De Bodman et al. (2017).
\textsuperscript{424} RAND Europe interview with an education analyst for the OECD (int-10) on 22 October 2021.
Conclusion

Over the period 2017–2021, ECD and the role of ECEC services in supporting this have increasingly been recognised as priority areas for action by both policymakers and the public in France. In addition to the existing government emphasis on childcare coverage and preschool attendance, between 2017 and 2021, the government introduced several key initiatives aimed at improving the quality of ECEC provision, increasing ECEC attendance among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children, and supporting parents to provide the best possible environment for their young child’s development. It is clear that ECEC services are no longer simply seen as a means of enabling parents to return to work, but also as key mechanisms for intervening in cycles of poverty and combatting social inequalities. The government’s recognition of the importance of these services for holistic ECD is also evidenced by the investments being made in improving the quality of childcare and preschool for all children, not just the most disadvantaged.

Nonetheless, significant limitations remain. Action in relation to increasing ECEC attendance among disadvantaged children still lags behind political will, due to a number of challenges, including a fragmented, decentralised system and staffing problems on the ground. Moreover, ECEC services continue to fall short of responding to the diversity of vulnerable families’ needs, and regional inequalities in relation to ECEC provision persist. In addition, government policy continues to prioritise academic skills and success over socio-emotional development, even at this early age. While such initiatives as the First 1000 Days are promising for progress in this area for children aged zero to three years, the trajectory for preschools appears to be heading in the opposite direction, with emphasis placed on preparing children for school in an effort to address academic inequalities at the earliest stage. The division in ministerial responsibilities for these age groups can be seen to be reflected in ECEC priorities, with childcare centres becoming a place for all children to develop holistically and preschools seeking to transform children into pupils at an ever-earlier age.

Finally, while research and data collection in these areas are increasing, important gaps – such as the reasons behind a reluctance to engage with ECEC services among certain population groups – remain. Evaluations of relevant policies and practice are becoming increasingly common, and their importance for effective action is becoming recognised. Nonetheless, the significant cultural shift and logistical challenges involved in normalising evaluative practice means that a rigorous, evidence-based approach to both policy and action remains a long way from being standard practice.
Holistic early education and care
References


Holistic early education and care


Break Poverty (2022), Fiche politique publique – Nos recommandations en matière de petite enfance.


Lelièvre, Catherine. 2018a. *‘Financement des EAJE: le point sur trois bonus de fonctionnement.’* Les Pros de la Petite Enfance, 1 October. As of 15 August 2022: https://lesprosdelapetiteenfance.fr/formation-droits/les-politiques-petite-enfance/financement-des-eaje-le-point-sur-trois-bonus-de-fonctionnement#~text=Les%20taux%20de%20financement%20s%2520%3A%2045%2520par%20place


———. 2020b. ‘La loi pour une école de la confiance.’ Education.gouv.fr. As of 3 February 2022: https://www.education.gouv.fr/la-loi-pour-une-ecole-de-la-confiance-5474


— ——. 2018. ‘Finance and Funding.’ Education GPS, 12 August 2022. As of 12 August 2022: Education GPS - Finance & Funding (oecd.org)


### Abbreviations

#### English acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td>continuous professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>early childhood development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEC</td>
<td>early childhood education and care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### English translations of names of French bodies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>French Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMF</td>
<td>Association des maires de France et des présidents d’intercommunalité</td>
<td>Association of French Mayors and Inter-municipal Presidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAF</td>
<td>Caisse d’allocations familiales</td>
<td>Family Allowances Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMSA</td>
<td>Caisse de mutualité sociale agricole</td>
<td>Agricultural Social Security Mutual Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNAF</td>
<td>Caisse nationale des allocations familiales</td>
<td>National Family Allowances Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comité départemental des services aux familles</td>
<td>Departmental Committee for Family Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conseil d’évaluation de l’École</td>
<td>Council for School Evaluations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

425 Translations were carried out by the research team for the purpose of this report.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>French Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CNPE</td>
<td>Conseil national de la protection de l’enfance</td>
<td>National Council for Child Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COFRADA</td>
<td>Conseil français des associations pour les droits de l’enfant</td>
<td>French Council of Children’s Rights Associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DREES</td>
<td>Direction de la recherche, des études, de l’évaluation et des statistiques</td>
<td>Directorate for Research, Studies, Assessment and Statistics of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Women’s Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FFEC</td>
<td>Fédération française des entreprises de crèches</td>
<td>French Federation of Childcare Centres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCFEA</td>
<td>Haut Conseil de la famille, de l’enfance et de l’âge</td>
<td>High Council for Family, Childhood and Age; national advisory body for family policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INED</td>
<td>Institut national d’études démographiques</td>
<td>National Institute for Demographic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse</td>
<td>Ministry of National Education and Young people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports</td>
<td>Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministère de la Santé et de la Prévention</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Prevention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministère des Solidarités, de l’Autonomie et des Personnes handicapées</td>
<td>Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy and Persons with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé</td>
<td>Ministry of Health and Solidarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONAPE</td>
<td>Observatoire national de la petite enfance</td>
<td>National Observatory for Early Childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONAPE</td>
<td>Santé publique France</td>
<td>The National Agency for Public Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPCO</td>
<td>opérateur de compétences</td>
<td>national skills provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMI</td>
<td>Service de protection maternelle et infantile</td>
<td>Mother and Child Protection Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDEI</td>
<td>Service départemental de l’école inclusive</td>
<td>Departmental Service for Inclusive Schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Term</td>
<td>English Translation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accueil pour tous</td>
<td>Childcare for All</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonus ‘inclusion handicap’</td>
<td>‘disability inclusion’ bonus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bonus ‘mixité sociale’</td>
<td>‘social diversity’ bonus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charte nationale de soutien à la parentalité</td>
<td>National Charter for Parenting Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charte nationale pour l’accueil du jeune enfant</td>
<td>National Childcare Charter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code de l’action sociale et des familles</td>
<td>Code for Social Action and Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissaire à la lutte contre la pauvreté</td>
<td>Counter-Poverty Commissioner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conférence des familles</td>
<td>Conference for Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>convention d’objectifs et de gestion</td>
<td>target and management agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entretien prenatal précoce (EPP)</td>
<td>early prenatal appointment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loi confortant le respect des principes de la République</td>
<td>Law to Strengthen Respect for the Principles of the Republic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loi d’accélération et de simplification de l’action publique (‘loi ASAP’)</td>
<td>Law for Accelerating and Simplifying Public Actions (‘ASAP law’)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordonnance relative aux services aux familles</td>
<td>Family Services Order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les 1000 premiers jours</td>
<td>The First 1000 Days</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loi pour une école de la confiance</td>
<td>School Reforms Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan rebond</td>
<td>Booster Plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Premiers pas</td>
<td>First Steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stratégie nationale de prévention et de lutte contre la pauvreté (‘plan pauvreté’)</td>
<td>Interministerial Strategy for the Prevention of and Fight Against Poverty (counter-poverty strategy)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stratégie nationale de soutien à la parentalité</td>
<td>National Strategy for Parenting Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Forms of childcare in France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>childcare services</th>
<th>modes d’accueil</th>
<th>Childcare services are paid services for parents with children aged two months to three years.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>childcare centres</td>
<td>crèches</td>
<td>Childcare centres accept children up to the age of three. Public childcare centres (crèches collectives) are run by specialised staff with 40 to 60 children, while family-run childcare centres (crèches familiales or services d’accueil familial) provide home-based childcare through a childminder overseen by a specialised organisation. There are also ‘micro’ childcare centres (micro-crèches) that accept only up to ten children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare Centres for Professional Integration</td>
<td>crèches à vocation d’insertion professionnelle (AVIP)</td>
<td>These childcare centres both reserve places for children aged zero to three with unemployed parents and assist the parents in finding employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>childcare centres</td>
<td>assistant(e)s maternel(le)s</td>
<td>Childminders are either registered with a public organisation and provide childcare for one or more children in their own home or are employed by a public or private organisation to provide childcare for 40 to 60 children at an established centre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>day-care centres</td>
<td>halte-garderies</td>
<td>Day-care centres are similar to childcare centres but provide ‘drop-in’ rather than regular care for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>early childhood centres</td>
<td>relais petite enfance (RPE)</td>
<td>Early childhood centres (relais petite enfance) offer free information and support for ECEC professionals and parents, as well as opportunities to exchange experiences, with the aim of improving the quality of care for young children.426</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

426 CNAF (2021).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service Type</th>
<th>French Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergartens</td>
<td>jardins d’enfants</td>
<td>Kindergartens accept only children aged over two years who are not attending school or who attend only part time. They are perceived by some to be under threat now that the compulsory age for preschool has been lowered to three years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Mixed’ childcare services</td>
<td>accueils mixtes</td>
<td>‘Mixed’ childcare services combine individual and collective care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanny</td>
<td>garde à domicile</td>
<td>A nanny provides childcare in the family home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>école maternelle</td>
<td>As of the start of the 2019 school year, preschool is obligatory for all children aged between three and six (with two-year-olds occasionally accepted based on availability).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early years assistants</td>
<td>agents territoriaux spécialisés des écoles maternelles (ATSEM)</td>
<td>Early years assistants support children and professionals in both childcare and preschool settings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

428 Moussy (2019).
429 Bazin (2020).
About this report

Context
This report was developed as an accompanying document to RAND Europe’s evaluation of the ECD Programme funded by Porticus in France. The Programme ran from September 2017 to December 2021. Its objective was to contribute to an improvement of the quality of ECD services in France to provide children aged zero to six (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) with better learning environments in which they can develop their social and emotional skills. Porticus commissioned RAND Europe to carry out an evaluation to understand how the ECD Programme works, the extent to which the programmatic approach adds value, and which areas (if any) could benefit from improvement. As part of this evaluation, RAND Europe sought to develop an overview of the key policies and practices in France relating to ECD and to assess how this landscape evolved over the course of the Programme. This research was intended both to inform the conclusions of the evaluation and to provide an accessible, stand-alone resource for researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders interested in the field.

Methodology
The findings presented in this report are informed by a series of targeted document reviews and semi-structured interviews carried out in December 2018, May–June 2020 and November–December 2021. The targeted document reviews included official government releases and reports, charity and other non-governmental organisations’ research reports, and news articles. In addition, interviews were carried out with 22 relevant stakeholders – including policy officials, early years practitioners, funders, local authority representatives and academics.

Acknowledgements
Stakeholder and expert consultations were essential for the successful completion of this research. RAND Europe is grateful to the individuals who gave their time to participate in the study. We are also grateful to project leader Axelle Devaux and our independent reviewers, Dr Emma Disley, Dr Julie Bélanger and Elena Rosa Brown, for their input, guidance and constructive criticism on preliminary results and earlier versions of this report, provided as part of RAND Europe’s Quality Assurance processes and standards.

The authors report no conflicts of interest. Any remaining errors contained in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors.