



**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and its importance for early childhood development

The [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), published on 24 March 2021, represents a milestone for the protection and promotion of children's rights across the EU and beyond. It is the first EU document of its kind and is a comprehensive and ambitious Strategy that delivers on the promise to create an instrument that promotes, protects, and champions the human rights of [90 million children living in the EU](#)¹, 20% of its population.

Very young children are often overlooked in debates and initiatives on children's rights, but respecting their rights from the earliest age is a key component of the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child recognizes that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to equal opportunities, from their earliest years.

The fact that the Strategy was developed with the participation of children themselves is particularly welcome. Several child rights organisations and the European Commission facilitated the [participation of 10,000 children in a consultation](#) to inform the content of the Strategy and the Child Guarantee. A child-friendly version of the Strategy was also developed, in consultation with children.

Together with the proposed European Child Guarantee, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child provides a strong framework for governments to increase public investment and support for early childhood and empower and strengthen vulnerable families and communities.

The Strategy includes several elements that could make a real, positive difference in the lives of young children, especially those who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged:

- ❖ The Strategy aims to protect and promote **the rights of every child** in the European Union.
- ❖ The recognition that every child has the **right to an adequate standard of living**, and to equal opportunities, **from the earliest stages of life**.
- ❖ The acknowledgement that **families and communities** need to be provided with the support necessary for them to ensure children's wellbeing and development.

¹ [Eurostat, Population data, 2020](#)

- ❖ The recognition that **social protection and support for families** is essential to strengthen socio-economic inclusion of children and address inter-generational poverty and disadvantage.
- ❖ The recognition that children at risk of poverty and social exclusion have more difficulties in **accessing essential services** and the call to Member States to implement the **Child Guarantee** and ensure access to key quality services for all children in need.
- ❖ The recognition that all children, including children with disabilities and the most disadvantaged, have the right to live with their families and communities, and the need for **integrated child protection, prevention and early intervention** systems, and **family support** necessary to prevent family separation.
- ❖ The need for a shift from institutional care to **quality community and family-based care**.
- ❖ The acknowledgement that there are children in the EU - such as Roma and Traveller children, homeless children, children in low-income families, and migrant children - who suffer from hunger and inadequate housing conditions, and the recognition that all children have the **right to a healthy environment and healthcare** and that **healthy nutrition** is vital for children's physical and mental development.
- ❖ The recognition that **early childhood education and care (ECEC)** is particularly beneficial to children's cognitive, language and social development and the need for targeted measures to ensure that children with disabilities, children living in extreme poverty, and children from migrant backgrounds and from ethnic or religious minorities have access to ECEC.
- ❖ The recognition that **all children have the right to develop their competences and talents, starting in early childhood and throughout their schooling** (also in non- and informal learning settings) and that access to inclusive, non-segregated, quality education should be guaranteed regardless of racial and ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, nationality, residence status, sex and sexual orientation.

There is still a need for a stronger focus on early childhood development:

In order for the Strategy to achieve its goals, it must catalyse greater understanding of, and commitment to, early childhood, as the foundation for optimum health, growth, and development.

That is why the *First Years First Priority* campaign is drawing attention to the following key issues:

- **Early childhood is a crucial stage of an individual's life** and as such requires specific focus. Very young children, and their families/caregivers, are not sufficiently recognised as requiring specific attention and approaches. The focus on early childhood services should not be limited to early childhood education and care (ECEC). An integrated and holistic approach to children's very

early years is necessary, as advised by the ‘Nurturing Care Framework’², developed by WHO, UNICEF and others. The framework includes five key areas that must be considered in policies, investments and services that contribute to children’s early childhood development: health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving, safety and security.

- **National strategies on the rights of the child** must include specific attention to children’s rights in early childhood, and to poverty and social exclusion faced by families and children from their earliest years, including through integrated policies and increased public investment in early childhood development support and services.
- **Access to quality maternal, newborn and child healthcare** is a key prerequisite for the healthy development of children, yet receives no mention except in the context of humanitarian action outside the EU. Universal access to quality healthcare in pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care (including mental and psychosocial support) should be a priority within the EU as well as in its global action.
- **Funding for children’s rights in EU programmes** – in order to fulfil young children’s rights and address poverty and social exclusion, Member States’ use of EU funding should include specific public investment in early childhood development.
- **The need for more comprehensive and disaggregated data on early childhood.** The Strategy rightly draws attention to the need for more comprehensive and systematic data collection. This must include more disaggregated and comparable data on children under three years of age and in vulnerable situations (e.g. children with developmental problems, children living in extreme poverty, children with minority background, refugee or immigrants, children in alternative care).

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² *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* (2018) WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, Every Woman Every Child, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, Early Childhood Development Action Network