



INTESYS

TOGETHER / Supporting  
vulnerable children  
through integrated early  
childhood services



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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS for strengthening integration in early childhood systems<sup>1</sup>

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### Why Integration?

There is growing evidence that the way early childhood systems are designed, governed and financed, and the way early childhood services are delivered, can make an important difference in the lives of children and their families. While the needs and demands of children and families are intertwined, often there is fragmentation in early childhood systems, which may lead to overlaps, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, depersonalization, gaps, even clashes, or missed opportunities with a high level of inequality. Poverty, discrimination and increasing inequalities need to be addressed in an integrated manner because one service alone, or parallel fragmented services cannot meet the diverse and complex needs of all children and families.

### Building on the Recommendations from the Council Conclusions (2018): Good coordination is essential.

Promoting an integrated approach in early childhood services is high on the agenda in the EU. In the Council Conclusions on "Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion", adopted by the Council of the European Union at its meeting on 21 June 2018<sup>2</sup>, it is stressed that "fighting child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being requires a multidimensional and integrated approach, based on three main pillars, including access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services and children's right to participate".

It is also stressed that "integrated and multi-sectoral policies are needed in order to support children's growth and health, to ensure early detection of difficulties and early interventions, including access to universal preventive health services and rehabilitation services, to guarantee quality early learning opportunities, to prevent neglect, violence and other risks. Good coordination and interaction between health, education, social and child protection systems is essential in that respect."

### Quality entails Integration

The *European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*<sup>3</sup> also stresses that collaboration between services across ages and sectors is also part of defining quality in ECEC (Statement 9: *Stakeholders in the ECEC system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organizations*). The Framework presents substantial evidence for integrated services in early childhood systems (especially vertical integration), starting with care and education, and across birth to six age group. 'When ECEC governance is not integrated (meaning that responsibility for ECEC regulation and funding rests with different departments both at the central and regional government level) or only partially (as in the majority of EU Member States), children aged under three experience a lower standard of care, there are higher costs to parents, less equal access to all families, and a more poorly educated and paid workforce.'<sup>4</sup> Integrated systems seem to offer more coherence across ECEC policy (e.g. regulation and funding, curriculum, workforce education/training and working conditions, monitoring and evaluation systems) as well as more

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<sup>1</sup> Integrated early childhood system are characterized by multi-sectoral comprehensive policies grounded in a shared vision and a holistic approach of child (under 6 years of age) and family's rights and needs, and enable coordinated funding and delivery of a variety of services (center-, home-, community-based) addressing various aspects of child's and family's life: health, education, social assistance and social protection, welfare, culture, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion - Council Conclusions, 2018 - <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10306-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 62

resources allocated to younger children and their families.<sup>5</sup> These unitary systems lead to better-quality and more equitable provision and result in greater financial efficiency. Sharing responsibilities between central government and local authorities improves how local needs are taken into account. At the same time, the decentralization of governance might increase the risk of accentuating differences in ECEC access and quality between regions.<sup>6</sup>

## From INTESYS to European and national policy recommendations

During the INTESYS Project<sup>7</sup>, the extensive literature review, the interviews with key stakeholders in different countries and the lessons learned from the pilot interventions in Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and Slovenia contributed to identifying several key factors that may support or hinder integration in the early childhood systems. Most notably, the factors that substantially impact sustainable changes towards integration in early childhood systems are political will and political support at national and local level.

**Rationale 1: Early childhood services should serve every child and family, and their communities. Meeting their needs and demands is the starting point in integration.**

### Policy recommendations:

- At **national level**, create mechanisms through which children and families can participate in designing and monitoring the integrated work of services and ensure that their views are accounted for in improving the cooperation among professionals and services.
- At the **local level**, ensure balance between “go structure” and “come structure”<sup>8</sup> in the different types of service provision and delivery, with more emphasis on services reaching out to families.

**Rationale 2: An integrated early childhood system is based on an agreed vision around early childhood and children, and on commonly agreed values and goals for joint action.**

### Policy recommendations:

- The **European Union, national and local** decision makers should ensure an open dialogue with representatives of various stakeholders (including children and families) involved in the early childhood system about the vision of early childhood and children, child and family centrality, and promote children's rights, values of social justice and respect for diversity, and the best interest of each and every child and family.
- Ensure that the vision, values and goals are revisited to meet the constantly changing needs of children and families and to reflect the changes in the local context.

**Rationale 3: An integrated early childhood system requires coordinated policies across sectors, services and age groups.**

### Policy recommendations:

- At the **European level**, create inter-sectorial bodies across General Directorates and cross-sectoral parliamentary groups to enable, guide and support at the country level, cross-sectoral early childhood policies and their implementation,
- At the **national and local level**, create (if not in place) inter-governmental bodies/councils and cross-sectoral parliamentary groups to enable and support cross-sectoral early childhood policies and their implementation.
- Introduce a European Reference Framework for Integration in Early Childhood Systems to provide guidance to **Member States** in their efforts to:
  - ✓ Mainstream child and family centrality with coherent policies across different sectors and services concerning staffing, financing and programming;
  - ✓ Promote a universal-progressive approach, combining universal policies that promote the well-being and development of all children and all families, with additional support to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable children and families.
  - ✓ Define the building blocks of integration within early childhood systems: underpinning values, key factors and quality practices. The Framework should be easily adapted to national and local level in different countries and serve as guidelines.
  - ✓ Address holistically the various aspects of children and families’ life: health, education, child and family protection, welfare, culture, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Kaga, Y., Bennett, J., and Moss, P. (2010). *Caring and learning together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childhood care and education within education*. UNESCO.

<sup>6</sup> Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care – Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission, (2014) p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/intesys>

<sup>8</sup> “Go structure” indicates that services reach out to children and families (e.g. home visitation), while “come structure” indicates the opposite, that services are sought out/visited by children and families.

- ✓ Promote participatory mechanisms for involving representatives of different sectors and services, of local governments, civil society organizations, researchers, professional and parents' associations in the development of cross-sectoral policies.

**Rationale 4: An integrated early childhood system is built on the culture and practice of cooperation, and on visionary and competent leadership at all levels.**

#### Policy recommendations:

- At **national level**, ensure that the initial preparation and the continuous professional development of early childhood practitioners and managers include learning experiences that are bridging the professions and services and enables cooperation among them (e.g. joint training/meeting with different categories of personnel and managers).
- Create **European and national** platforms for promoting successful examples of cooperation, collaboration and coordination among services, across sectors and use them to further the countries' early childhood policy agenda and to nurture peer learning (e.g. "champions" of integration at leadership and service level).

**Rationale 5: Funding mechanisms and financial models incentivize cooperation across governance levels, sectors and services in the early childhood system.**

#### Policy recommendations:

- Use various **EU funding** programmes (e.g. Erasmus+, European Social Fund, Horizon 2020, Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, etc.) to incentivize State Members' efforts to strengthen horizontally and vertically the integration in their early childhood systems and learn from each other.
- At **national level**, explore new sustainable funding models that match the 'integrated' way of thinking and working, to prevent financial fragmentation and guarantee longer term support, rather than project-based funding.

**Rationale 6: Competent frontline workers are key to a functional and efficient integrated early childhood system.**

#### Policy recommendations:

- Following the recommendations in the European Commission's Communication from 2017<sup>9</sup>, at **European and national level** support the higher education institutions

to contribute to innovations by tackling the complexity of contemporary society and real life challenges, through enhancing multidisciplinary knowledge and care ethics; systemic and integrative interventions with families and the community, valuing diversity and intercultural awareness and human/children's rights.

- Enrich the existing **European** Qualification Framework<sup>10</sup> by introducing knowledge and skills and attitudes required for cooperation across professions. Introduce a European Competency Framework, which will go beyond ECEC and ensure that different professionals working in early years' services know how and are able to work in an integrated way.
- At **national level**, ensure policies for professional development that provide for time and recognize the value of professional development programs organized across services and sectors to incentivize the dialogue among professional cultures, shared learning, group reflection and smooth cooperation among practitioners.

**Rationale 7: Integration in early childhood systems is built in time, by learning from monitoring and evaluating the processes and practices of collaboration, cooperation and coordination and the outcomes of integration.**

#### Policy recommendations:

- Use various EU funding programmes (e.g. Horizon 2020) for research on integration of early years' services to enrich the existing knowledge, to document its effects on children and families, to measure cost effectiveness and define quality practices, alter and improve existing policies and inform preparation of new strategic documents and policies.
- At **European level**, introduce measures and regulations which will promote an ethical approach to collection, sharing and protection of relevant, quality and reliable data, while preventing GDPR directive from hindering the collaboration between sectors and services.
- Introduce a comprehensive European Reference Framework for Integration in Early Childhood Systems to provide guidance to **Member States** in their efforts to:
  - define quality and indicators for monitoring the quality of practices in integrated way of working
  - monitor processes in building integration
  - define indicators to measure staff capacity and satisfaction
  - learn about child and family outcomes.

<sup>9</sup>Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a Renewed EU Agenda for Higher

Education, COM(2017) 247 final, Brussels, 30.5.2017; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0247>

<sup>10</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/content/descriptors-page>