

BELGIUM

Key Contextual Data

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Sources are outlined at the end of each section. Full details of all sources are to be found in the references section at the end of the key contextual data profile. Individual statistical data used in tables are indicated by an asterisk*, both in the table and in the sources.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Belgium is a federal and multilingual country comprising

- three autonomous Regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region, Brussels Capital Region),
- three language Communities (Flemish, French, German-speaking), and
- four language areas (Dutch, French, German, and French-Dutch in the Brussels Capital Region).

Each Region and language Community has its own system of early childhood education and care. While some contextual data apply for the country as a whole, most vary according to the Region/Community and where this is the case, each language Community will be presented separately.

ECEC system type and auspices

The system of early childhood education and care in Belgium is organised as a split-sector system. Different ministerial authorities are responsible for provision for children under 2½ years of age (childcare sector) and for children from 2½ years up to compulsory schooling at age 6 (education sector).

Regarding the education system, responsibilities were devolved to the three Communities in 1984. Only the age for starting and completing compulsory schooling and the minimum requirements for qualification awards are still determined at the federal level. Consequently, the federal government has only limited prerogatives in terms of education.

Flemish Community

Pre-primary education for children aged 2½ to 6 years comes under the auspices of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (*Vlaams ministerie van onderwijs en vorming*). Childcare provision for younger children is the responsibility of the Ministry for Welfare, Families and Equal Opportunities (*Ministerie van Welzijn, Gezin en Gelijke Kansen*) and is managed by the Flemish government agency 'Child and Family' (*Kind en Gezin*). The agency is also responsible for implementation strategies but is not a provider of childcare services. Municipal, private non-profit and private for-profit providers are responsible for the running of provision.

French Community

Responsibility for pre-primary education, primary schools and further education lies with the Parliament of the French Community. Pre-primary institutions for children aged 2½ to 6 years come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (*Ministère de l'Éducation*).

Childcare provision for children below the age of 2½ years comes under the responsibility of the Bureau for Birth and Childhood (*Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance - ONE*), an organisation affiliated to the Ministry for Culture and Childhood (*Ministère de la Culture et de l'Enfance*).

All childcare provision for children up to the age of 12 has to be approved by ONE. Together with the Community, regional administrative authorities supervise the management of the childcare buildings.

German-language Community

Kindergartens for 3- to 6-year olds come under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research. However, the Ministry of Family, Health and Social Affairs is responsible for the inspection of provision as well as funding, quality assurance and evaluation. The agency 'Services

for Children and Families' (*Dienst an Familie und Kind, DFK*) is responsible for administering these tasks.

ECEC settings for the under-threes are not viewed as educational settings. They are generally run by private, non-profit providers and come under the responsibility of the Ministry for Employment, Health and Social Affairs.

The Regional Centre for the Care of Young Children (*Regionalzentrum für Kleinkindbetreuung, RZKB*) is responsible for the administration and organisation of provision.

Sources: European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
Eurydice 2015.
Kind en Gezin 2015.
ONE 2017.
Peeters, J. and F. Pirard with colleagues 2017.
Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017b.

General objectives and legislative framework

Since pre-primary education for 3- to 6-year olds is part of the education system in Belgium, the general objectives set out in the Decree on Primary Schools (1999) are applicable for both kindergartens and primary schools. Goals include the support and promotion of social-emotional, intellectual, psychomotor and artistic areas of learning. Legislation is mostly also valid for both kindergartens and primary schools.

The Constitution forms the overall framework, highlighting the freedom of education and the principle of equality of opportunity regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or religion.

Flemish Community

A new Government Decree on the organisation of childcare provision (*Decreet Opvang van Baby's en Peuters*) came into effect in April 2014, to be fully implemented over a period of ten years. Since that date, all settings now have to have a licence and to be regularly inspected by the government agency *Kind en Gezin*. The legislation also stipulates that all persons working in childcare must possess a relevant qualification by 2024.

French Community

The overarching principles and goals of *ONE* are: 'Quality, Equality, Ethics, Continuity and Fair Treatment'. The agency supports children's development in the family and social community, and helps mothers and families in medical and social respects linked to the children's well-being.

German-speaking Community

According to the Government Decree on Childcare (2007), the most important goal is to offer each child according to his or her individual needs optimal chances for development, regardless of race, nationality, gender or ideology.

Sources: Eurydice 2015.
Kind en Gezin 2015.
ONE 2017.
Peeters, J., F. Pirard and colleagues 2017.
Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017b.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory enrolment age

Children aged 2½ to 6 years in Belgium are entitled to a free place in a pre-primary setting. The number of hours of entitlement varies according to the Community. Pre-primary education is not obligatory in general, only in some specific targeted cases. Compulsory schooling begins at age 6.

Flemish Community

In Flanders, 2½- to 6-year olds are entitled to a place in a pre-primary setting for 23-33 hours per week free of charge. Attendance is obligatory for a certain number of hours if the parents receive a school allowance. For example, a 3-year old has to attend the setting for at least 150 half-days per year.

French Community

Children aged 2½ years up to school entry have a free entitlement to 28 hours per week in a pre-primary setting.

German-speaking Community

In May 2015, a government decree on services and other forms of childcare came into force which stipulates that each family in need also has the right to a place in childcare for children under 2½ years of age.

Sources: European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice 2016.
European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
Eurydice 2015.
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.
OECD 2017.

Main types of provision

Flemish Community

Childcare sector

Infant-toddler centres (*kinderdagverblijf*) for under 2½-year olds and all registered family day care staff are required, since April 2014, to have a licence; this is allocated if various requirements regarding the infrastructure, hygiene, safety and fire-protection measures, as well as the quality of staff qualifications are met, together with a confirmation provided by the municipality. The licences are inspected annually by *Kind en Gezin*; settings which cannot produce a licence have to close down. Infant-toddler centres are obliged to be open on 220 days per year and to guarantee opening times of at least 11 hours daily between 6:00 and 20:00.

In 2014, 65% of all childcare places for babies and toddlers in Flanders were provided by infant-toddler centres. A total of 2,058 centre-based settings provided 56,679 places; 5,827 home-based care settings provided 31,253 places. Beyond this, 328 age-integrated centres offered an additional 3,906 places.

Table 1

Belgium/Flemish Community: Number of settings and places for babies and toddlers, 2014**

	Number of settings	Number of places
Home-based settings	5,827	31,253
Centre-based settings	2,058	56,679
Age-integrated centre-based provision	328	3,906
Total number of babies and toddlers	8,213	91,838

Education sector

Since 2003, **kindergartens** (*kleuterschool*) have to comply with a new organisational structure of combined kindergarten/primary school. However, former independent (free-standing) kindergartens (less than 10% in 2011/12) may maintain their current organisation form. When children reach the age of 2½ they can be enrolled in a kindergarten at several points during the year (staggered entry). The settings open at the earliest at 8:00 and close at the latest at 17:00, with a one hour midday break. On Wednesday afternoons they are closed.

In 2015/2016, there were 162 free-standing kindergartens and 2,177 combined kindergartens and primary schools in Flanders, providing places for a total number of 269,740 children.

Table 2

Belgium/Flemish Community: Number of kindergarten settings and children enrolled, 2015/16****

	Number of settings	Number of children
Independent, free-standing kindergartens	162	
Primary schools with integrated kindergartens	2,177	
Total	2,339	269,740
Including: Special institutions and number of children enrolled	105	1,984

French Community

Childcare sector

Infant-toddler centres (*crèches*), municipal **children's houses** (*maisons communales d'accueil de l'enfance*) and registered **family day carers** are the main forms of provision for under 3-year olds. Each setting must have a licence from *ONE*. Infant-toddler centres are open throughout the year, usually from 7:00 until 18:30.

In 2015, 43,007 places (including home-based child care) were available for 165,509 children. 70.8% (30,464) were subsidised by *ONE* (see Table 3).

Table 3

Belgium/French Community: Number of settings and places for under 2½-year olds, 2015***

	Number of settings	Number of places
Settings subsidised by ONE		
Infant-toddler centres (<i>crèches</i>)	392	15,747
Day care centres (<i>prégardiennats</i>)	34	802
Municipal children's houses (<i>maisons communales d'accueil de l'enfance</i>)	197	3,356
Other forms	11	189
Home-based child care (<i>accueillant conventionné</i>)	2,671	10,370
Total subsidised settings/places	634 not including family day care 3,305 including family day care	20,094 not including family day care 30,464 including family day care
Settings not subsidised by ONE		
Children's houses (<i>maisons d'enfants</i>)	414	7,837
Sessional care (<i>haltes accueil</i>)	128	1,661
Independent family day carers (<i>accueillants et co-accueillants autonomes</i>)	771	3,045
Total non-subsidised settings/places	542 not including family day care	9,498 not including family day care

	Number of settings	Number of places
	1,313 including family day care	12,543 including family day care
Total subsidised and non-subsidised settings/places	1,176 not including family day care 4,618 including family day care	29,592 not including family day care 43,007 including family day care

Education sector

Kindergartens (*écoles maternelles*) are attended by children aged between 2½ and 6 years. They are open for 182 days a year over 37 weeks. They are usually open for nine half-days (on Wednesday afternoons they close), from at the earliest 8:30 until at the latest 16:00, with at least one hour's midday break. During the summer they are closed for two months. Many settings provide wrap-around facilities before and after attending kindergarten or during lunchtime.

German-speaking Community

Childcare sector

Under 3-year olds can be enrolled at a setting run by the non-profit Regional Centre for Babies and Toddlers (RZKB). Since 2015, there are two **infant-toddler centres** in the German-speaking Community – in 2016, 111 children were enrolled. They are open from 7:30 until 17:30 and close down for four weeks annually. Most under-threes are cared for in home-based settings. These are either organised by the RZKB (85 family day carers for up to 4 children each) or are independent and provide 10 hours care per day on 220 days in the year.

Education sector

Kindergartens are attended by 3- to 5- or 6-year olds. Children may be 2 years 8 months old when they start, since children whose third birthday falls by the end of December are admitted in September. Kindergartens are always attached to primary schools. Opening times are the same as those for schools: in general 5 mornings (mostly 8:30 till 12:00) and 4 afternoons (mostly 13:30 to 15:30). The younger children often attend mornings only.

In 2013, there were 61 kindergartens in the German-speaking Community (5 organised by the Community, 54 municipal, and 2 private/church-affiliated settings, all subsidised by the Community*. There are no more recent data available.

Sources: BISA 2017a, b.
DGlive 2017.
European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
*Eurydice 2013.
**Eurydice 2015, 2016.
***flanders.be: 5, 11f.
Kind en Gezin 2015.
***ONE 2015.
Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017b.

Provider structures

Across Belgium, **education sector** facilities for children from 2½ to 3 years of age are state-maintained.

A variety of providers are active in the **childcare sectors** of the three Communities:

Flemish Community

There are three main types of provider/provision: (1) settings run and fully financed by the Flemish Community; (2) subsidised public settings organised by local authorities; and (3) subsidised private settings – also confessional. Almost 64% of children in provision attend a private, mostly Catholic, setting, 22% municipal and 14% state-maintained settings.

French Community

The provider structures are similar: (1) public, state-maintained settings organised, managed and financed by the Community; (2) settings run and organised by the municipality which receive Community subsidies; and (3) private settings, also church-affiliated, which are also subsidised by the Community and managed by individuals or legal entities. In 2014/15, over half the children in provision (52.7%) were in municipal settings, 39% in church-affiliated, mostly Catholic settings and 7.3% in a setting run by the Walloon Federation Brussels*.

German-speaking Community

Childcare for under 3-year olds is mostly provided by private persons or non-profit organisations. The Regional Centre (RZKB) is responsible for founding and organising such provision.

Sources: *AGE 2017.
Eurydice 2015.
Peeters, J. and F. Pirard with colleagues 2017.

Participation rates in regulated provision

According to Eurostat data, there has been a significant increase in the participation rates of under 3-year olds in ECEC provision over the past decade or so. Whereas only 7% of children in this age group were enrolled in 2005, the participation rate had risen to just over 50% in 2015. Even by 2013, Belgium was one of only six countries to have achieved both Barcelona targets (33% of under-threes, 90% of children aged 3 up to school entry)**.

Nearly all children aged 3 to 6 years attend a kindergarten. In 2015, over three-quarters of these were enrolled for more than 30 hours per week.

Table 4

Belgium: Participation rates according to duration of attendance in centre-based settings 2005-2015*

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years in %	3 years up to school entry in % [†]
2005	1 to 29 hours	2	30
	Over 30 hours	5	49
	No attendance	93	22
2010	1 to 29 hours	1	14
	Over 30 hours	8	66
	No attendance	91	21
2015	1 to 29 hours	23.3	21.7
	Over 30 hours	26.8	77.1
	No attendance	49.9	1.3

In 2015, the distribution according to age groups for the country as a whole was as follows (see Table 6). Since there are no data available for the under 2-year olds, it is not possible to calculate an enrolment ratio for the under 3-year olds or the under 6-year olds.

Table 5

Belgium: Number and enrolment in ECEC provision according to age-groups, 2015***

Age groups	Number	Enrolment ratio, in %
Under 2 years	No data available	
2-year olds	67,876	52.4
3-year olds	128,359	97.8
4-year olds	131,022	98.1
5-year olds	128,952	97.1
3- to under 6-year olds	388,333	97.9⁺
2- to under 6-year olds	456,209	86.7⁺

* Own calculations based on Eurostat data from 2015.

Information relating to the three Communities are as follows:

Flemish Community

According to data provided by the Ministry of Education, 82% of 2-year olds and 99% of 5-year olds attended a kindergarten in 2015 (*kleuterschool*). However, particularly children from disadvantaged milieus or children with a migration background are less frequently enrolled in a centre-based setting. In 2014/15, only 1.4% of children in the 2½ - 6 years age group were not enrolled in a centre-based setting. The number of children not attending at all or attending irregularly is highest in the large towns. The government and the government agency *Kind en Gezin* have both launched initiatives (e.g. the project *Kleuterparticipatie*) to increase participation rates – on the assumption that it contributes positively to later school achievements.

French Community – Walloon Federation Brussels

In 2014, 188,415 children aged 2½ to 6 years were enrolled in a kindergarten, i.e. over 90% of the age group. An additional 19,866 children aged 2½ to 3 years attended a centre-based setting. 42,046 places were available in 2014, most of them (19,597) in infant-toddler centres or registered home-based settings (10,293). A further 9,020 places were provided by non-subsidised settings and 3,136 by non-subsidised family day carers****.

Since one place is generally used by more than one child (according to *ONE*, 1.4 children in 2014), it can be assumed that the actual enrolment rate is higher. In 2014, 37,075 under 3-year olds attended publicly run and 16,775 non-subsidised settings and 19,866 a kindergarten, making a total participation rate of 44.1%.

German-speaking Community

In 2016, 2,367 children were enrolled in a kindergarten. In 2013, 598 under 3-year olds and 373 over 3-year olds were in family day care provided by 598 family day carers of the RZKB and 136 under 3-year olds and 43 over 3-year olds in settings provided by independent family day carers****.

Sources: BISA 2017c.
 EPIC 2016.
 **European Commission 2013.
 European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
 *Eurostat 2017f.
 ***Eurostat 2017h, 2017i.
 Eurydice 2015.
 ****ONE 2015.
 Peeters, J., F. Pirard and colleagues. 2017.
 *****Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017a, 2017b.

Financing and costs for parents

No fees are charged for attending a **kindergarten** in the education sectors in all three Communities. Parents are obliged only to cover costs for meals.

Flemish Community

Regulated **childcare settings** are partly financed by the government agency *Kind en Gezin*, which receives subsidies from the Flemish government, and partly through (income-related) parental contributions. Alongside general subsidies, municipal settings receive an agreed sum from *Kind en Gezin* for each place provided and also part of the staffing costs. In the private settings, parental fees are the main source of income; however, the government covers the difference between the parental contributions and the effective costs. Under certain circumstances they may also receive funding support from *Kind en Gezin*.

The level of subsidies provided by *Kind en Gezin* depends on various conditions which settings have to fulfil. For settings for under 2½-year olds, they are divided into four levels. At the highest level, a setting receives, alongside a basic subsidy, an income-related grant and additional funds. Parents pay a regulated, income-related monthly fee. These can range between 33€ and 650€¹, on average 297€ per month*.

On average, around 45% of childcare costs in Flanders are financed through parental contributions**.

French Community

Some of the settings licensed by *ONE* are fully funded by the agency. In non-subsidised settings, decisions on parental contributions are made by the setting itself. Fees for a place in an infant-toddler centre may vary between 50€ and 737€, on average 297€ per months*.

German Community

Parental fees for a place in an infant-toddler centre vary according to income and range between 1.39€ and 27.10 € per day*.

Sources: DGlive 2017.
Eurydice 2015.
*European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
Kind en Gezin 2015.
**OECD 2015.

Staff-child ratios

Flemish Community

In childcare centres for the under-threes there are usually at least nine and at most 18 children in a group at any one time. A qualified staff member is responsible for a maximum of eight children. If several staff members are present, each one may also be in charge of nine children. During rest/nap times, a staff-child ratio of 1:14 is also permissible. There are ongoing attempts to reduce the staff-child ratio to 1:7.

Kindergartens are usually organised into single-age groups: 2½ to 3 years, 3 to 4 years, 4 to 5 years and 5 to 6 years. However, settings are free to choose their preferred group format and may also decide on group size.

¹ The amounts in Euro refer to the artificial common reference currency unit PPS (Purchase Power Standard) used in the European Union to express the volume of economic aggregates for the purpose of cross national comparisons (European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014, 156).

French Community

According to the standards issued by *ONE*, at least one staff member is responsible for six to seven children. Infant-toddler centres are usually organised in same-age groups. If there are enough children in a kindergarten, they are also usually organised in same-age groups.

German-speaking Community

In infant-toddler centres children are grouped according to their developmental stage. A maximum of six children per staff member is allowed*.

For kindergartens, there are no regulations regarding group formation – both same-age and mixed-age groups are possible. Group size depends on the staffing plan, and this in turn is dependent on the total number of children enrolled. If overall numbers are between six and 19 children, one post of kindergarten educator is allocated, 1½ posts if between 20 and 25 children, and two posts if between 26 and 32 children. If there are more than 33 children enrolled, a quarter of a full post is allocated for each additional group of 5, 6 or 7 children

Sources: *European Commission, EACEA, Eurydice, and Eurostat 2014.
Eurydice 2015.
Kind en Gezin 2015.

Curricular Frameworks

Flemish Community

For childcare centres for children below the age of 2½ years, a pedagogical framework was issued in 2014 by the Flemish Ministry for Health and Families. Commissioned by *Kind en Gezin*, the framework was developed by Ghent University and the Catholic University of Leuven. It describes in detail what is understood by pedagogical quality and how it can be achieved. Until now, there has been no obligation to publish how this programme is used, but it is expected that each setting can demonstrate how certain aspects of the pedagogical framework are implemented.

In the general core curriculum for kindergartens (*Ontwikkelingsdoelen*), developmental goals to achieve are formulated, covering five areas of learning: (1) physical education, (2) artistic education, (3) Dutch language, (4) world studies – nature, technology, humankind, society, (5) introduction to mathematics. During inspection visits checks are made to see whether these developmental goals are being followed. Each setting develops its own educational programme according to the different ages of the children which has to be approved by the government. 28 to 29 learning units of 50 minutes each are planned for each week.

French Community

Building on the Childcare Quality Code (1999), curricular guidance was developed (*Accompagner les petits – aspirer à la qualité; Accueillir les tout-petits – Oser la qualité*) for the work in both centre-based and home-based settings for children younger than 2½ years; these were based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and recommendations made by the European Commission Network on Childcare. Each setting develops its own programme accordingly.

For kindergartens, learning goals are set out in the Decree on the Mandate of Schools (1997) (*Décret définissant les missions prioritaires de l'enseignement fondamental et de l'enseignement secondaire et organisant les structures propres à les atteindre*). These include supporting children's socialisation, promoting self-perception, developing cognitive, social, affective and psychomotor skills and identifying possible difficulties in individual children.

German Community

No curricular framework is available for settings working with children below the age of 3 years, since they are viewed as purely care services.

For kindergartens, the Activities Plan (2004) sets out learning goals in the following areas: Home language, foreign language (between 50 and 200 minutes weekly in French as a first foreign language), psychomotor development, world orientation, arts education, developing mathematical thinking. There is no strict time plan regarding the individual areas. The Activities Plan also emphasises the importance of age-appropriate projects based on the interests and needs of the children.

Sources: Eurydice 2015.
Pirard, F. 2011.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

In Belgium, children with special educational needs and disabilities should – as far as possible – be able to attend regular ECEC provision.

In the **Flemish Community**, extra hours are funded in regular ECEC settings for children who need additional support. Each setting can decide how these hours will be used (individual support, coaching staff, etc.). In special education settings, individual educational plans are produced for each child. Children have to be 2½ years old and provide an attestation before they can attend such a setting.

Children with special educational needs in regular ECEC settings in the **French Community** can be granted support by specialised staff. There are some special education settings which in particular provide for children with physical disabilities.

When required, children with disabilities in the **German-speaking Community** can participate in special educational measures. If children have an attestation from a psychological, medical or social services centre, when they reach the age of 3 years they can be enrolled in a special kindergarten.

Children with a background of migration

In 2017, 11.7% of the total population originated from a country other than Belgium. 67.4% of this population group came from other EU countries, 13.9% from African countries*. In the age group of children under 5 years of age, 12.7% were of non-Belgian origin; well over half of these children (58.3%) came from other EU states**.

In the **Flemish Community** in 2015/2016, settings for children older than 2½ years received 950€ as a temporary measure for each child who did not speak the Dutch language and was in need of additional support.

A Decree from 2012 in the **French Community** provides a framework for improved integration of immigrant children.

In 2016, 20.5% of the population in the **German-speaking Community** were of non-Belgian origin, whereby 86% of these persons came from other EU states***.

Sources: *BISA 2017d.
European Commission, EACEA, and Eurydice 2016.
**Eurostat 2017g.
Eurydice 2015.
***Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017c.

Monitoring – Evaluation – Research

Flemish and French Communities

External evaluations (inspections) focus on features of the setting (e.g. equipment, rooms, hygiene, safety, staff-child ratio), staffing and staff qualifications, how the curriculum is implemented (only in the case of kindergartens), and children's achievements. Self-evaluation measures are also utilised to analyse team work and cooperation with the Centre Head, and also satisfaction with the working conditions. Checklists, rating scales, interviews and observations are the main instruments used for assessment.

Flemish Community

The Flemish Care Inspectorate is responsible for the inspection of all settings which have been approved and/or funded by the Ministry of Health and Families. *Kind en Gezin* assesses the settings for under 2½-year olds regularly and refers to the aspects noted by the Flemish Care Inspectorate during their evaluations. Since the 2014 Act on the Organisation of Day Care came into force, all providers of more than 18 places for under 2½-year olds have to comply with a quality manual setting out structural features of centre-based and home-based childcare.

Flanders has developed a new assessment and mentoring framework. A recently concluded research project (*Measuring and Monitoring the Quality of Childcare for Babies and Toddlers - MeMoQ*) has been involved in the development of assessment instruments: one to assess the overall quality of the ECEC sector in Flanders; another for the inspectorate to evaluate the quality of the centres and the family day care providers as well as a self-evaluation instrument for reflecting on the quality of pedagogical practice. These instruments are now used by the inspectorate and by most childcare centres to improve the quality of daily practice.

The Education Inspectorate (*Onderwijsinspectie*) is responsible for the inspection of kindergartens. Kindergartens may also develop their own assessment strategies. The frequency of inspections depends on the findings of the previous one.

French Community

Childcare settings for under 2½-year olds are inspected by the government agency *ONE* in terms of compliance with a mandatory Quality Code. Staff qualifications, overall quality, safety aspects of the buildings, and staff interactions with children are examined – in general every two or three years.

Implementation of curricular guidance has to be self-evaluated by the childcare centre as well as by *ONE*. Subsidised settings need a Quality Certificate which is awarded by *ONE* if the quality goals set out in the centre's quality improvement plan have been reached; the certificate is valid for three years. Child-related assessment procedures in terms of outcomes are not a priority, but the children's development is assessed from a medical point of view.

Internal assessments in kindergartens are generally based on observations of the children. Findings are summarised two to three times a year and discussed with the parents. A project called *Décollage!* (Start!) was introduced in 2012, with the aim, among other things, of ensuring that children with difficulties do not stay for an unnecessarily long time in kindergarten, but are supported in achieving a sound transition to primary school. During the children's third year of attending a kindergarten, external assessments ('maturity tests') are carried out by the Centre for Psychological, Medical and Social Services (*Centre des services psychologiques, médicaux et sociaux*). Depending on the results, parents may decide whether their child should be admitted to school at the age of 5 or whether school entry should be deferred for a year.

German-speaking Community

The Ministry of Family, Social Affairs and Health, through the agency 'Service for Child and Family' (*Dienst für Kind und Familie, DKF*), assesses and evaluates the childcare settings. Children under age 3 are not assessed.

In kindergartens an ongoing assessment of the children's progress is carried out, mostly through observations. The basis for this formative evaluation are the learning goals (see above). The in-

formation is documented in written form and shared with the parents. Some kindergartens also carry out school readiness tests.

Sources: Eurydice 2015.
Kind en Gezin 2015.
OECD 2015.

Parental leave arrangements

Maternity leave (*Moederschapsverlof, congé de maternité*):

For employees and unemployed mothers the length of maternity leave is 15 weeks, up to 6 weeks of which can be taken before the due date. One week before the expected birth date and nine weeks after delivery are obligatory. Employees in the private sector receive 82% of their salary during the first month and 75% during the following weeks – up to a ceiling of 135€ a day. Employees in the public sector continue to receive their full salary. Maternity leave is financed over the Federal Health Insurance, i.e. over the employees and employers.

Paternity leave (*Vaderschapsverlof, congé de paternité*):

Employees are entitled to 10 working days, 3 of which are obligatory and fully paid; for the remaining days they receive 82% of their salary (up to a ceiling of 110€). These 10 days can be taken during the first 4 months following the baby's birth.

Parental leave (*Ouderschapsverlof, congé parental*):

Each parent may take 4 months of parental leave, receiving a net monthly payment of 721€. Parental leave can be taken flexibly, either on a full-time basis or as various part-time options during which it is also possible to work. Altogether, parental leave can be taken up to the child's 12th birthday and can also be taken by both parents at the same time.

Since 2015, it is also possible for employees in the private sector to take up to 4 years of parental leave or, for example, to work less hours for a period of 8 years in order to have more time at home for their children or for care work*.

No statistical data are available on the number of women who either make use of their complete maternity leave entitlement or only part of it. However, since the length of paternity leave was extended to 10 days in 2002, the proportion of fathers who take all 10 days of paternity leave has increased considerably. In 2014, almost 57,300 employees made use of parental leave (26.4% more than in 2007), most frequently in the Flemish Community. The part-time options are used significantly more often than the full-time model. Although most of those making use of the parental leave entitlement are women, the proportion of men rose from 8.3% to 25.7% between 2002 and 2012. Regional variations can also be found in this respect: whereas 1.8% of fathers in the Flemish Community made use of their parental leave entitlement, in the French Community this was the case for only 0.9% and in the Brussels Region for only 0.8%.

Sources: *EPIC 2016.
Merla, A. 2017.

Historical highlights and shifts

1827	First educational institution for young children established (alongside the more custodial institutions founded by philanthropists, municipal administrations and factories)
1831	Establishment of Belgium as a nation state: Freedom of organising education is formalised – soon interpreted broadly as a right to education
1843	Educational institutions for young children first officially recognised by the State

1857	First Froebel kindergarten established
1858	First professional training courses for women working in kindergartens and primary schools
Since 1880	State-run and publicly funded ECE institutions for 3- to 6-year olds
1890	First early childhood curriculum issued, based largely on Froebel's ideas
Since 1927	Three-year higher education course of study a requirement for working with the 3- to 6-year olds
1950	Almost all 3- to 6-year olds attend a centre-based setting
1965	First admission of 2½-year olds into centre-based settings
1989	Responsibility for Education is devolved to the three Communities
1991/1995	Quality Decree including regulations on inspection, pedagogical guidance and the required developmental goals for kindergartens
1997	Kindergartens become part of the school system
2002	Belgium did not perform well on the <i>Programme for International Student Assessment</i> in terms of disadvantaged children; an 'equal opportunities decree' (GOK) followed, giving schools extra funding based on their socio-economic status and ethnic/cultural composition, and requiring schools and local authorities to respect priority admission rules in order to ensure a social and cultural mix in schools and prevent social segregation
2014	Ministerial Decree on the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education. This is the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Sources: Peeters, J., personal communication, April 2018.
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.

Current challenges for the system of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belgium

Country expert assessment by Jan Peeters

For the Flemish and French Communities, the transition of 2½-year olds to Kindergarten is a challenge. The kindergarten is not well adapted to the youngest children, and not enough attention is given to the care needs of toddlers. Especially for children with a family language other than Dutch or French, the first months in kindergarten can be emotionally very stressful. The groups are also very large (sometimes more than 25 children per qualified teacher). In some classes, childcare workers are employed to work alongside the teacher and are responsible for care tasks and for looking after the children outside the classroom periods (during meals at midday, in the playground). While meant to support the teacher, this is in effect resulting in a split between caring and teaching roles, whereas what are needed are educators with a holistic vision of ECEC.

In recent years, the childcare sector in the Flemish Community has been growing considerably, but these new places are mostly in childcare settings with staff qualified and paid at a low level. Although the new law of 2014 stipulates that the entire workforce needs to be qualified by 2024, there is as yet no concrete plan as to how the many unqualified childcare workers can receive a qualification before 2024. The low salaries are also a challenge because they contribute towards giving the sector a negative image, which could lead to further problems in the future; the sector will continue to grow and low salaries are likely to impede motivated and qualified persons in choosing a job in child care.

Another challenge in both Communities is that the qualification level of the childcare worker is low in comparison with other European countries. There should be at least one educator with a Bachelor's degree in each group of babies and toddlers in Belgium.

Demographic data

Total population

In 2016, the population in Belgium totalled 11,311,117. This is a further indication of a steady increase in numbers over the past 20 years (1995 total: 10,130,574 and 2005 total: 10,445,852).

Table 6

Belgium: Population over time, 1996-2016**

	1996	2005	2014	2016
Brussels Capital Region	948,122	1,006,749	1,163,486	1,180,531
Flemish Region	5,880,357	6,043,161	6,410,705	6,471,996
Walloon Region	3,314,568	3,395,942	3,576,325	3,602,216 76,645
Belgium total	10,143,047	10,445,852	11,150,516	11,256,759

Children under 6 years of age

In 2016, children under age 3 accounted for 3.3% and children under 6 years of age for 6.8% of the total population. Since 2005 these percentage rates have been lower than the EU average, whereas in 1995 they were slightly above.

Table 7

Belgium: Children under 6 years of age, 2016

Age of children	Number of children
Under age 1	122,381
1-year olds	126,288
2-year olds	127,278
Under age 3 total	375,947
3-year olds	130,321
4-year olds	131,908
5-year olds	134,243
Total 3- to under 6-year olds	396,472
Total 0- to under 6-year olds	772,419

Table 8

Belgium: Children under 6 years of age – share in total population compared with EU average, 1995 to 2016, in %[†]

Age	1995	Ø EU15 ²	2005	Ø EU25	2016	Ø EU28
Under 3-year olds	3.4	3.3	2.8	3.1	3.3	3.0
3- to under 6-year olds	3.6	3.5	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.1
0- to under 6-year olds	7.0	6.9	5.7	6.2	6.8	6.2

[†] own calculations, deviations due to roundings

² The 1995 data are for the EU15 countries at the time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK); the 2005 data (EU25) also include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2014 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR.

Source: **BISA 2017d.
Eurostat 2017a.
**IWEPS 2017.
**Statistikportal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2017c.

Single households with children under age 6

In 2015, 79.1% of households with children under age 6 were couple households. Single parent households accounted for 6.5%, whereby these were almost exclusively single mother households (5.8%).

Table 9

Belgium: Households with children under age 6, 2015

Household type	Total households	Total households in per cent [†]
Households – total	1,184,200	
Couple households	936,200	79.1
Other types of households	171,400	14.5
Single households, total	76,500	6.5
Single households, women	68,100	5.8
Single households, men	8,400	0.7

[†]Own calculations

Source: Eurostat 2017e.

Employment rates of parents with children under age 6

In 2015, the employment rate of men (aged 15 to 64) in Belgium was 65.5% and that of women 58%.

Of the women with children under 6 years of age, only 67.4% were employed in 2015, whereas 84.4% of men with children of the same age were in the labour market.

The proportion of mothers in employment is higher in Belgium than the EU average, whereas for fathers the proportion is below average.

Table 10

Belgium: Employment rates of parents with children under age 6 compared with other EU states, 2005-2015[†]

	Year	Mothers in per cent	Fathers in per cent
Belgium	2005	66.3	88.9
	2010	68.7	87.5
	2015	67.4	84.8
European Union	EU15 – 2005	77.3	93.5
	EU27 – 2010	75.2	92.7
	EU28 - 2015	61.0	87.3
Highest rate of employment	2005	Slovenia – 76.8	Cyprus – 95.3
	2010	Slovenia – 76.7	Netherlands – 93.5

	Year	Mothers in per cent	Fathers in per cent
	2015	Sweden – 78.9	Malta/Czech Republic – 93.0
Lowest rate of employment	2005	Malta – 29.3	Bulgaria – 72.4
	2010	Hungary – 32.7	Latvia – 74.8
	2015	Hungary – 38.8	Bulgaria – 77.3

*own calculations

Sources: Eurostat 2017b.
Oberhuemer, P., I. Schreyer, and M.J. Neuman 2010.

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion³

In 2015, 21.1% of children under age 6 in Belgium were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was below the EU average (24.7%) for this age group. This is the highest poverty rate in the EU28 (average = 24.7%) for this age group. The proportion of persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion within the overall population also totalled 21.1%.

Source: Eurostat 2017d.

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³ 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity.

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