

BELGIUM

Key contextual data

Compiled by

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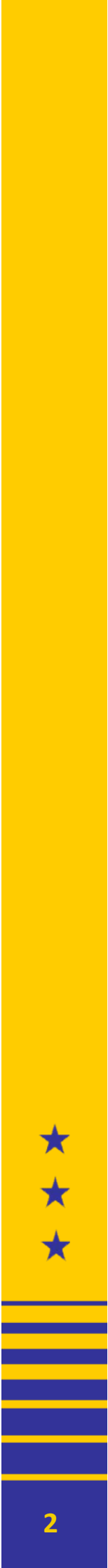


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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

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.

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the general terms used in this report for the main forms of ECEC provision are: **childcare centre** (*kinderopvang*; *crèche*; *Kinderkrippe*, 0–2) and **pre-primary school** (*kleuteronderwijs*; *école maternelle*; *Kindergarten*, 2½–5)¹. Any additional specific forms are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Belgium

The table describes milestones at the national level only. After 1989 policies became the chief responsibility of the Belgian Communities

1827	First educational institution for young children (3-5) 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	In the first Belgian law on public education, educational institutions for 3 to 5 year-olds are officially recognised and state subsidies are introduced for municipal settings.
1857	First Froebel kindergarten established in Elsene, a Brussels suburb
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 5 year-olds
1890	First early childhood curriculum issued, based largely on Froebel's ideas
Since 1927	Three-year higher education studies a requirement for working with 3 to 5 year-olds
1950	Almost all 3, 4, and 5 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.
2020	Attending pre-primary education becomes obligatory for 5 year-olds.

Sources: Peeters et al. 2018; Willekens and Scheiwe 2020.

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for settings for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years. In Belgium the corresponding formats are **0–2** and **2½–5**.

ECEC system type and auspices²

Overall, Belgium's early childhood education and care system is a 'split' system with different responsibilities for children under 2½ years of age and children between 2½ years of age and primary school entry at 6.

Since the 1988-1989 constitutional reform, responsibility for education in Belgium has been assigned to the three Communities (Belgium.be 2021). Only the decisions on of the beginning and end of compulsory schooling and the minimum requirements for the award of diplomas are still federal matters. Accordingly, the federal government has only very limited rights with regard to education.

Flemish Community

Childcare for children under 2½ years of age is the responsibility of the Flemish Minister of Welfare, Health and Family (*Departement Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Cultuur*). Since 2019, the former Agency Child and Family (*Kind en Gezin*), together with a department of the Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities, now forms the new Agency for Growing Up (*Opgroeien*). This has the task of creating as many support services as possible for all children and their families in Flanders and Brussels, including childcare. The new agency is no longer responsible for organising childcare, but mainly for implementing the Flemish government's strategies.

Pre-primary education institutions (*kleuteronderwijs*) for children from 2½ to 6 years old are the responsibility of the Flemish Minister of Education and Training (*Departement Onderwijs*).

French Community

Childcare centres for children under 2½ years of age are supervised by the Office of Birth and Childhood (*Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance - ONE*), which operates under the responsibility of the Minister for Childhood, Health, Culture, Media and Women's Rights (*Ministre de l'Enfance, de la Santé, la Culture, des Médias et des Droits des Femmes*). All non-school childcare settings for children up to age 12 must be approved by ONE, which is also responsible for supervision and inspection. Together with the Community, the regional administrations ensure the management of the buildings.

Overall responsibility for pre-primary education institutions (*écoles maternelles*), primary school and secondary education lies with the Minister of Education of the French Community. For the *écoles maternelles* for children between 2½ and 6 years of age, the Department of Education and Scientific Research (*Administration générale de l'Enseignement et de la Recherche scientifique*) of the Ministry of the French Community of Belgium is responsible. According to a Decree issued in 2019, its tasks are the implementation of general educational policy and the administrative and financial management of the staff (FWB 2022a).

German-speaking Community

The Department of Family and Social Affairs of the Ministry of the German-speaking Community is responsible for the supervision of childcare provision, the issuing of licenses, subsidies and quality assurance. The agency "Service for Child and Family" (DKF) is responsible for the implementation of these tasks (Eurydice 2021). The organisation and monitoring of the facilities is the responsibility of the Regional Centre for Childcare (RZKB).

² The Eurydice country reports on ECEC in Belgium provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are indicated within the text and in the references section.

The Department of Education, Training and Employment of the Ministry of the German-speaking Community is responsible for pre-primary education (kindergartens) for children between the ages of 3 and 6 years.

General objectives and legislative framework

The overarching legal framework is the Constitution, which enshrines freedom of education and the principle of equal opportunity, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or religion.

Flemish Community

In April 2014, a government Decree (*Decreet opvang van baby's en peuters*) on the organisation of **childcare** services came into force. According to this legislation, all settings for children under 3 years of age must have a license. The responsible agency (*Opgroeien*), a new agency which includes the service provider *Kind en Gezin* among others (*Opgroeien 2023a*), regularly checks whether the criteria and legal conditions are met.

With regard to **education** and therefore also pre-primary settings, the Decree on Basic Education (*Decreet basisonderwijs*, 1997 with amendments until 2020) forms the legal basis (*Vlaanderen is onderwijs & vorming 2021*).

Since 2019, the strategy paper "Education 2019-2024" of the Flemish Parliament aims mainly at achieving 'top quality' in education, giving professionals the acknowledgement they deserve, giving every child the support they need, and investing in learning and working environments.

French Community

Legal foundations for **childcare** include the Quality Code (*Arrêté du Gouvernement de la Communauté française fixant le code de qualité et de l'accueil*, 2003), which sets out principles and quality standards, and the Decree of 2019, which addresses improving accessibility to early childhood care services (*ONE 2019, 2021*).

In addition to the Constitution, the "Schools Pact", which came into force in 1959, applies by law to all educational institutions, including **pre-primary education**. It organises and standardises relations between the different users. Changes in the school system were laid down in the new law *Décret du Code de l'enseignement* (FWB 2020).

German-speaking Community

The legal basis for **childcare** in the German-speaking Community is the Decree on Childcare (2014, with amendments from 2020) and the Government Decree (2014) on services and other forms of childcare.

For **education** and therefore also for pre-primary institutions (kindergartens), the law of the so-called "Schools Pact" (1959) applies.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

In Belgium, children between the ages of 2½ and 6 have a legal right to a free place in a pre-primary educational institution (*kleuteronderwijs, école maternelle, Kindergarten*). The number

of hours varies according to the language community. As of September 2020, the last year before school enrolment is compulsory in all Communities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 10, 54). Primary school begins at age 6.

Flemish Community

In Flanders, children aged 2½ to 6 years are entitled to a free place in a pre-primary setting (*kleuteronderwijs*) for 23 to 33 hours a week. This right does not exist for under 2½-year-olds. However, the municipalities are obliged to offer a place in a childcare setting, which is allocated according to priority criteria. The institutions receive subsidies from the government for this. No child under the age of 5 is obliged to attend an ECEC setting.

250 half days of attendance in the compulsory pre-primary year (when children are 5 years old) are required to transfer to primary school. If this attendance standard has not been met, the school council makes a decision on the transfer to primary school.

French Community

Children from 2½ years of age are entitled to 23 free hours per week in an *école maternelle*.

German-speaking Community

There is no legal entitlement to a place in childcare for under 2½ year-olds. There is currently a waiting list because demand is greater than supply.

All 3 to 5 year-olds are entitled to a place in kindergarten.

Main types of provision

Flemish Community

Childcare sector

Since April 2014, **childcare centres** (*kinderopvang*) for under 2½ year-olds and also all registered **home-based childcare** workers have to have a permit. This is issued when various requirements have been met regarding infra-structure, hygiene, safety and fire protection measures and staff training quality, with a confirmation from the respective municipality. The licences are reviewed annually by the authorities; childcare centres that do not have such a licence have to close. Childcare centres have to be open for 220 days per year and guarantee daily opening times of at least 11 hours between 6:00 and 20:00.

In 2022, 68.3% of the total number of places for babies and toddlers in Flanders were covered by centre-based settings. In total, 2,051 centre-based settings offered 63,622 places and 3,459 home-based settings offered 22,680 places. In addition, 479 multi-age centres provided 6,826 places (Opgroeien 2023b).

Table 1

Belgium–Flemish Community: Number of settings and places for babies and toddlers, 2022

	Number of settings	Number of places
Home-based childcare settings	3,459	22,680
Centre-based childcare settings	2,051	63,622
Combined models	479	6,826
Total	5,989	93,128

Source: Opgroeien 2023b



Education sector

Since 2003, **pre-primary education settings** (*kleuteronderwijs*) have to be linked to a school (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 110). From the age of 2½ years, children can start attending the institution on several fixed dates during the year. *Kleuteronderwijs* are open from 7:00 to 18:00 for at least 220 days a year and have a one-hour lunch break. They are generally closed on Wednesday afternoons.

In 2020/21, there were a total of 161 stand-alone pre-primary centres and 2,293 integrated facilities (*kleuteronderwijs* and primary school). A total of 257,625 children were enrolled in 2,454 regular pre-primary settings (DET 2022, 6f) and 2,406 in 123 special education settings (DET 2022, 13f).

Table 2

Belgium–Flemish Community: Number of pre-primary settings and children enrolled, 2020/21

	Settings	Children enrolled
Self-contained <i>kleuteronderwijs</i>	161	
Primary schools with integrated <i>kleuteronderwijs</i>	2,293	
Total	2,454	257,625

Source: DET 2022, 6f

French Community

Childcare sector

The main types of care for children between 3 months and 3 years are **childcare centres** (*crèches*) and registered home-based childcare workers (*accueillantes d'enfants*).

All must have a licence issued by *ONE*. Childcare centres for under 2½ year-olds are open at least 220 days a year, usually at least 10 hours a day from 6:00 to 19:00.

At the end of 2021, there were a total of 46,222 childcare places (including home-based childcare) for 51,561 children, of which 34,422 places for 37,432 children were subsidised by *ONE*, and 12,800 places for 14,129 children were not subsidised by *ONE* (*ONE* 2022, 26, 28). Table 3 provides an overview.

Table 3

Belgium–French Community: Number of places and children in the childcare sector for under 2½ year-olds by setting type, December 2021

	Number of children	Number of places
Childcare settings subsidised by ONE		
Childcare settings (<i>accueil collectif</i>)		25,814
Home-based settings (<i>accueil familial</i>)		8,608
Total	37,432	34,422
Childcare settings not subsidised by ONE		
Childcare settings (<i>accueil collectif</i>)		9,718
Home-based settings (<i>accueil familial</i>)		2,082
Total	14,129	11,800
Total (subsidised and not subsidised by ONE)	51,561	46,222

Source: ONE 2022, 26ff, 30

Education sector

Pre-primary education settings (*écoles maternelles*) are attended by children between 2½ and 6 years of age and are open 182 days a year, spread over 37 weeks. As a rule, this means nine half days (Wednesday afternoon is closed) from 8:30 at the earliest until 16:00 at the latest, with at least one hour for lunch. As from 2023, the summer break lasts between seven and eight weeks.

Sometimes *école maternelle* classes for the year before school entry are located in primary schools (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 110). In many *écoles maternelles*, childcare services are provided before and/or after regular opening hours or during the lunch break. Currently (FWB n.d., 9.11.2023), there are 1,750 *écoles maternelles* in the French Community. 1,082 of these are publicly funded settings, 147 of which are organised by the Community. 668 *école maternelles* are privately run but state subsidised settings, of which 648 are denominational.

German-speaking Community

Childcare sector

Children under 3 years of age can attend a setting run by the non-profit Regional Centre for Early Childcare (*Regionalzentrum für Kleinkinderbetreuung - RZKB*). There are currently three **childcare centres** in the German-speaking Community providing 84 places for 186 children in 2022 (Familienportal 2023 bzw. Statistikportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2023a). They are open from 7:30 to 17:30 and closed for four weeks a year.

Most under 3 year-olds are looked after in **home-based childcare** settings, overall 477 children in 2022. With a maximum staff to child ratio of 1:4, these are either organised by the RZKB or the providers are self-employed (in 2022 those cared for 429 under 3 year-olds), providing 10 hours of care for 220 days a year (Statistikportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2023a).

In 2022, 2,017 children aged 3-12 years were enrolled in out-of-school childcare settings (before and after primary school and on Wednesday afternoons) (Statistikportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2023a).

Education sector

In 2018/19 there were 27 kindergartens and primary schools in the German-speaking Community, 3 public and 24 subsidised private institutions. Kindergartens are attended by 3 to 5 or 6 year-old children. The youngest children are 2 years 8 months old. Kindergartens are always attached to primary schools. Opening hours are the same as at school: usually 5 mornings (mostly 8:30 to 12:00) and 4 afternoons (mostly 13:30 to 15:30). Younger children often attend mornings only. In 2022, 2,637 children were enrolled in a kindergarten (Statistikportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2023a).

Provider structures

In the three **childcare** sectors, providers differ in each Community. In the French and Flemish Communities, children under 3 years of age usually attend privately run childcare settings (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 41).

In the **Flemish Community**, there are several large 'umbrella organisations' that operate as childcare providers/organisers. They are non-profit organisations that mainly offer childcare

places in home-based ECEC provision and out-of-school care, but also group-based settings, albeit to a lesser extent. They also offer other support services besides childcare to families such as maternity care, domestic help and home nursing. Some of these large umbrella organisations date back to the period of pillarisation (early 20th century) and have a history/culture of safeguarding working conditions and providing support for their childcare services. In the past decade, several of these organisations have undergone fusions, making the link with the original pillar less prominent. In addition to these large umbrella organisations, several small non-profit bodies are active in organising childcare. The scale of these smaller organisations varies from one to several childcare services. Besides private childcare providers, also the municipalities organise childcare. In the Flemish Community there is an umbrella organisation (VVSG - *Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten*) that supports cities and municipalities in doing so. They count as an equivalent childcare provider to the aforementioned large umbrella organisations. Because the 2014 Decree equalised the subsidy regulations for all childcare in the Flemish Community, the distinction between private and public providers is now less relevant than before the introduction of the Decree.

The situation in the **French Community** is similar to the one described for Flanders. Besides the public sector (childcare services organised by a municipality or by a municipal social public centre *CPAS - Centres Publics d'Action Sociale*), there are large umbrella organisations in the 'non-market' sector: the UNESSA (*Union En Soins de Santé*, health care union) which covers regional branches and services active in the reception, support, assistance and care of people in the voluntary sector, particularly in the childcare services in Wallonia and Brussels; the FILE (*Fédération des Initiatives Locales pour l'Enfance*, Federation of Local Initiatives for Children) also federates secular organising authorities (non-profit organisations and public authorities) in the childcare and child protection sector, throughout the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The *Cosege (Coordination des services d'accueil d'enfants de la fédération Wallonie Bruxelles)* and *FSMI (Fédération des Services Maternels et Infantiles*, Federation of Maternal and Child Services) bring together home-based services. The public (municipality, CPAS) and non-market (ASBL - *Association sans but lucratif*, non-profit association) sectors correspond for the most part to subsidised childcare facilities (70%). The private sector which corresponds to a maximum of 30% of the facilities covers non-subsidised childcare services or independent childminders.

Education sector

Flemish Community

In Belgium, **pre-primary schools** for children aged 2½ years up to the beginning of primary school are state-subsidised. There are three providers of pre-primary settings in the Flemish Community: (1) pre-primary schools fully funded by the Flemish Community; (2) publicly-subsidised *kleuteronderwijs*, which are established by municipal authorities and receive state subsidies; and (3) private *kleuteronderwijs* subsidised by the state. In 2020/21, 61.3% of children in *kleuteronderwijs* attended private state-subsidised institutions, 22.4% municipal state-subsidised and 16.3% Flemish Community institutions (DET 2022, 13).

French Community

The vast majority of pre-primary settings are public. There are three types of provider of *écoles maternelles*: (1) organised, managed and fully funded by the French Community; (2) managed by municipality and subsidised by the Community; and (3) managed by private or legal entities but subsidised by the Community. Private, non-subsidised facilities are almost non-existent.

Table 4

Belgium–French Community: Number and share of children in pre-primary settings by provider, 2020/21

Provider	Number of children	Share of enrolments, in %
<i>Écoles maternelles</i> Fully funded by the French Community	11,454	6.8
Publicly-subsidised <i>écoles maternelles</i> run by municipalities	89,918	53.1
Private state-subsidised <i>écoles maternelles</i>	67,927	40.1
Total	169,299	

Source: FWB 2022a

In 2020/21, slightly more than half of the children in *écoles maternelles* (53%) attended a publicly-subsidised institution run by the municipality (*officiel subventionné*), approximately 40% a private state-subsidised setting (*libre subventionné*) and 7% an institution fully funded by the Walloon Federation of Brussels (FWB 2022a).

German-speaking Community

Childcare for children under 3 years of age is mostly provided by private individuals or non-profit organisations. The Regional Centre for Early Childcare (RZKB) is responsible for the establishment and organisation of such facilities.

In 2018/19, the majority of kindergartens (24 out of 27) were private state-subsidised settings; there are no fully private kindergartens.

Participation rates in regulated provision

According to Eurostat data, there has been a significant increase in the attendance rates of children **under 3** years of age in childcare settings over the last 17 years. While in 2005 only 42% of children in this age group attended a childcare centre, by 2022 this figure was already over 52%. As early as 2013, it was noted that Belgium was one of the six countries that had achieved both Barcelona targets (33% of children under 3 and 90% of children between 3 and school entry in institutional childcare).

In 2022, almost all **3 to 5 year-olds** are enrolled in a pre-primary setting; almost 80% attending for more than 30 hours a week (see Table 5).

Table 5

Belgium: Enrolment rates in ECEC centre-based settings by age and duration of attendance, 2005-2022

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %	3 years to compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	23	50
	Over 30 hours	19	48
	No enrolment in ECEC	59	2
2010	1 to 29 hours	17	36
	Over 30 hours	19	63
	No enrolment in ECEC	65	1
2015	1 to 29 hours	23.3	21.7
	Over 30 hours	26.8	77.1

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %	3 years to compulsory school age, in %
	No enrolment in ECEC	49.9	1.3
2022	1 to 29 hours	17.9	19.7
	Over 30 hours	34.8	78.7
	No enrolment in ECEC	47.3	1.7

Source: Eurostat 2023b, differences in the sums due to rounding

In 2021, for the whole of Belgium, almost all over 3 year-olds attended a pre-primary setting in the education sector, as well as half of the 2 year-olds (see *Table 6*). Eurostat does not provide similar statistics for the childcare sector.

Table 6

Belgium: Number and enrolment rates of children in pre-primary settings in the education sector by age, 2021

Age	Number of children	Enrolment rates
Under 2 years	3	
2 year-olds	61,828	51.4
3 year-olds	118,532	97.1
4 year-olds	122,904	98.2
5 year-olds	123,628	97.6

Source: Eurostat 2023f, g

The information for the three language Communities is as follows:

Flemish Community

In September 2022, 53.3% of children between the ages of 2 months and 3 years were in centre-based settings. The slight decrease from 55% in 2019 could be due to an improved calculation method on the one hand, but also to the Corona pandemic on the other. At the end of 2022, there were 93,128 licensed places for babies and toddlers in 5,989 facilities; 22,680 places with childminders (Opgroeien 2023a, b).

The relative shares by age group are as follows:

Table 7

Belgium–Flemish Community: Enrolment rates in formally licensed childcare settings for babies and toddlers by age, 2022

Age	Enrolment rates, in %
2–5 months	26.1
6–11 months	62.7
12–17 months	68.9
18–23 months	69.0
24–29 months	69.8
30–35 months (most of this age-group are already enrolled in a kindergarten)	12.7

Source: Opgroeien 2023a

French Community

At the end of 2021, the enrolment rate of the under 3 year-olds in a centre- or home-based setting was 37.4%. More than three quarter (76.9% see *Table 8*) of the available places are in centre-based settings.

In 2021, there were 1.16 enrolled children for each place in a childcare setting subsidised by ONE (ONE 2022, 30).

In **pre-primary education**, particularly in the year before school enrolment, the demand for places is higher than the supply (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 13).

Table 8

Belgium–French Community: Number of places and children under 3 years of age in centre-based and home-based ECEC settings, end of 2021

Setting type	Number of available places	Number of children
Centre-based	35,532	
<i>Subsidised by ONE</i>	25,814	
<i>Not subsidised by ONE</i>	9,718	
Home-based	10,690	
<i>Subsidised by ONE</i>	8,608	
<i>Not subsidised by ONE</i>	2,082	
TOTAL centre-based and home-based	46,222	51,561
<i>Subsidised by ONE</i>	34,422	37,432
<i>Not subsidised by ONE</i>	11,800	14,129

Source: ONE 2022, 26f, 30

In 2020/21, 169,299 children aged 2½ to 6 years attended an *école maternelle*, more than half (53.1%) were in a publicly subsidised setting. 1,297 children attended a special education institution (*l'enseignement spécialisé*) (FWB 2022a).

By age group, attendance rates at the *école maternelle* in 2020/21 were 42% for 2 year-olds, 92% for 3 year-olds, 95% for 4 year-olds and 94% for 5 year-olds. Overall, 92% of 3 to 5 year-olds attended an *école maternelle* (FWB 2022a).

German-speaking community

In 2022, 477 children under 3 years of age (altogether 751) were registered in home-based settings of the RZKB, 429 (467 altogether) in private home-based settings by self-employed childminders. 168 under 3 year-olds attended a nursery. The attendance rate of under 3 year-olds was 46.6% in 2022 (Statistikportal der deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2023a).

In 2021, 2,559 of 3 to 5/6 year-olds attended a kindergarten, the majority (2,023) a publicly-subsidised kindergarten, 366 attended one in the community education system and 170 attended one in the freely-subsidised education system (Ministerium der deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2022, 16).

Although kindergarten attendance is not compulsory, statistical surveys show that around 98% of 3 year-old children regularly attend. Thus, it can be assumed that almost all children attend kindergarten for an average of three years (Bildungsportal der deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens 2022).

Financing and costs for parents

In 2019, 0.81% of GDP was spent on the ECEC sector as a whole: 0.1% on provision for under 3 year-olds and 0.7% on provision for 3 to under 6 year-olds (OECD 2023).

In all three Communities, parents of under 3 year-olds have to pay for a place at a childcare setting, whereas attending a pre-primary education setting is free of charge, with parents paying only for meals.

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 14% of net household income on childcare costs³ (OECD.Stat 2023).

Flemish Community

For roughly three-quarters of places in subsidised facilities for young children, parents pay an income-related amount. Childcare settings which do not receive subsidies or with only basic subsidies can set their own fees.

The *kleuteronderwijs* is free of charge, as are the necessary materials. Contributions may, however, be required for extra-curricular activities.

French Community

Childcare sector

Some of the childcare centres approved by ONE are fully funded by the authority and in these, parental fees are income-dependent. In 2022, parents paid an average of €17.82 per day per child under the age of 3, less for siblings or children with disabilities (ONE 2022, 28).

In childcare settings that do not receive subsidies, the setting itself decides on the parental contributions. Subsidies usually depend on staffing levels, enrolment rates of children and health issues. In 2022, 74.5% of childcare places (see *Table 3*) were subsidised by ONE (ONE 2022, 27, own calculations).

Education sector

Attending an *école maternelle* is free for parents of children over 2½ years old. Meals and certain extracurricular activities usually have to be paid for.

German-speaking Community

Self-employed carers in home-based settings set their own fees. For centre-based settings, fees are income-based.

Kindergartens are subsidised by the German-speaking Community and are free of charge for parents.

Staff to child ratios and group size

Flemish Community

In childcare centres for children under 3 years of age, there are usually a minimum of nine and a maximum of 18 children in a group at any one time. A qualified professional is responsible for

³ The calculation is based on: full-time working parents (average wage); two children aged 2 and 3 years in full-time childcare; childcare benefits included.

a maximum of eight children. If more than one professional is present, each one may be responsible for nine children. During rest periods, a ratio of 1:14 is also permitted for a maximum of two hours.

In *kleuteronderwijs*, children are usually grouped by age: 2½ to 3 years, 3 to 4 years, 4 to 5 years, and 5 to 6 years. However, settings can also decide on the group composition themselves. Decisions about group size are also a matter for the pre-primary setting: there are no formal regulations regarding group size.

French Community

In childcare centres, one qualified member of staff is responsible for seven children. Depending on the setting, groups can be same-age or mixed-age. Home-based carers are responsible for up to five children at a time.

In the *école maternelle*, one qualified member of staff is responsible for 20 children; a maximum group size is not specified. As a rule, two or three same-age groups are formed. Mixed-age groups are mostly found in rural areas where there are too few children to form same-age groups.

German-speaking Community

Centre-based childcare settings for under 3 year-olds have a capacity of 24 places. The children are divided into three groups based less on age and more on developmental aspects. There must be three childcare workers for 18 infants (i.e. a ratio of 1:6) as well as socio-educational staff.

In the **home-based childcare** settings (a maximum of three full-time childminders), 12 children can be cared for at the same time. A maximum of four children under 3 years of age and two children up to the age of 12, including the childminder's own children, are cared for at the same time. Self-employed home-based carers are responsible for a maximum of four children under 3 years of age and two children up to the age of 12, including their own children up to 6 years. Exceptions can be made under specific conditions.

There are no regulations regarding the formation of groups in **kindergartens**. Both same-age and mixed-age groups exist. The size of the groups depends on the staffing plan, which in turn depends on the total number of children. For six to 19 children, one specialist post is allocated, for 20 to 25 children 1.5 and for 26 to 32 children two posts are provided. From 33 children onwards, a quarter of a post is added for each additional group of five, six or seven.

Curricular frameworks

In all three Communities, children in pre-primary education are given 28 learning units of 50 minutes each per week (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 49).

Flemish Community

Childcare sector

A pedagogical framework for childcare settings for under 2½-year-olds was introduced in 2014 by the Flemish Ministry of Welfare, Health and the Family. This framework was commissioned by the professional supervisory authority *Kind en Gezin* and drawn up by Ghent University and the Catholic University of Leuven. It describes in detail what is meant by pedagogical quality and how it can be implemented. So far there is no obligation to disclose how the framework is used,



but it is expected that an institution is able to show how it implements the different dimensions of the framework.

Since 2017, there has been a so-called action plan to facilitate the transition from a childcare setting to pre-primary education. For this purpose, a working group consisting of the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry of Education was formed with four objectives: (1) structural continuity (ensuring cooperation between the different services at regional and local level, paying special attention to vulnerable groups); (2) pedagogical continuity (aligning pedagogical frameworks); (3) professional continuity (sharing responsibilities between all professionals involved in the transition); (4) continuity in terms of the family, neighbourhood and community through partnerships between professionals, parents and community (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 38).

Education sector

In the Decree on Elementary Education (*Decreet Basisonderwijs*, B.S.25/06/2018) the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training defined 'developmental goals' (*ontwikkelingsdoelen*) for pre-primary education. Developmental goals are the minimum goals in terms of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes that the school should strive for in its pupils. They refer to a number of basic competences which pre-schoolers are expected to be able to acquire in everyday school activities. The developmental goals are formulated in six different domains: physical education, people and society, musical education, Dutch, science and technology, and mathematics. Schools are expected to make efforts to achieve these goals but the children are not tested by the independent inspectorate.

Each *kleuterschool* develops its own educational plan with corresponding goals which has to be approved by the government. The different age groups of the children are also taken into account. The curriculum is compulsory and only applies to institutions recognised by the authorities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 96).

French Community

Childcare sector

Based on the Care Quality Code of 2003 (*code de qualité de l'accueil*), curricular frameworks have been developed for working with children under 2½ years of age, both in centre-based and home-based settings. These are essentially based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and recommendations of the European Commission. Based on these principles and with the help of various brochures produced for this purpose, each childcare centre develops its own plan (Pirard 2011). In doing so, a focus is placed on the best conditions for child development, the quality of interaction between professional and child, the development of self-confidence and autonomy, and the support of age-appropriate socialisation.

Education sector

Curricula apply only to public and private-subsidised institutions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 96).

The Pact for Excellence in Education (*pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*) applies to all educational institutions, including pre-primary education. In its revised version this now defines a new "common core" based on eight areas of learning and knowledge. In September 2020 a new framework for pre-primary education was adopted by Parliament. The Guide to Initial Competences (*référentiel des compétences initiales*) defines the skills a child must have acquired by the end of the pre-primary period and on which the setting's educational plan must be based. The guidelines refer to various learning areas such as the development of autonomy, creativity

and thinking; knowledge of language and culture; beginnings of reading and various artistic activities; experimenting and exploring the world. The developmental appropriateness of the provision is considered particularly important.

German-speaking community

No curricular framework exists for the pedagogical work in childcare settings for under 3 year-olds.

For kindergartens, the Activity Plan of 2004 applies, which is based on development goals in the following learning areas: German language; foreign language (between 50 and 200 minutes per week in the first foreign language French); psychomotor development; world orientation; music education; development of mathematical thinking. There is no strict time allocation for the individual areas. In addition, the Activity Plan emphasises the importance of age-appropriate projects that are adapted to the interests and needs of the children. Play is at the centre of the pedagogical activities.

Digital education

Flemish Community

In the curriculum for childcare the use of digital tools is not mentioned. However, a recent NESET report on high-quality ECEC in the era of COVID-19 (Van Laere et al. 2021) acknowledges that digital tools can support the communication with families and provide alternative discussion and training platforms for ECEC staff. Consequently, the report highlights the importance of investing in this direction. Concerning the use of digital tools with children, the report underlines that they are an important support, but cannot replace face-to-face relationships, especially when in the case of young children. As far as professional development is concerned, a Flemish initiative called 'BLINK' ("Blended Learning in Childcare") was launched in the summer of 2022. The goal of BLINK is to provide an online learning platform to support childcare workers. BLINK was developed as a collaboration of five umbrella organisations of Flemish childcare providers. Currently, the platform is still being finalised, but it is already operational. BLINK comprises e-modules, inspiring practices and videos that should become accessible for the whole childcare sector.

French Community

In the curricula for childcare services and pre-primary schools, digital education is not mentioned. The use of digital tools is integrated in the curriculum from the primary school onwards. As in the Flemish Community, this use is developing in communication with parents alongside face-to-face relationships. It raises ethical issues and is becoming a topic for initial and continuing professional education. It is also becoming a support for professional development programmes. Following the pandemic, some training courses have switched to distance learning sessions and several webinars have been organised. An online training offer is being considered through pilot projects. New trainings focused on the childcare service leaders (leader certificate) will provide work platforms and some of them propose a distance learning component. In addition, the "notreplandeformation.be" platform (APEF, *Association Paritaire pour l'Emploi et la Formation*) - ONE collaboration - accessible to all public and associative organisations supports the development and monitoring of training plans for the 0–12 childcare sector. Finally, a ONE "digital resource centre" project for trainers in the childcare sector will be operational in March 2023.



German-speaking Community

In the curricula for childcare services, digital education is not mentioned.

In 2018, the municipalities concluded a framework agreement with the government to promote information and media literacy in the municipal schools. In this agreement, the municipalities, as the responsible bodies for most of the pre-primary schools in the German-speaking Community, have committed themselves, among other things, to ensuring that the teaching of information and media literacy at their schools is or becomes part of the school project of each school. It also states that information and media literacy must already be taught in pre-primary education in an age-appropriate manner.

Monitoring – evaluation

Flemish Community

Child-related assessment

All 5 year-olds must take a uniform Dutch language proficiency test ('KOALA-test'); if they have a weak score on this test, teachers are expected to intensify their Dutch language programme towards these children.

To transfer to primary school, children must have been registered for at least 250 half-days in the last year of *kleuteronderwijs*. As a rule, parents have a say in whether or not the child transfers to primary school (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 105f). The school board, however, makes the final recommendation based on the attendance of an individual child as well as on the estimated Dutch language proficiency.

Centre-level internal evaluation

Since 2017, a self-evaluation tool for **childcare centres** enables them to assess their own quality. Even though not mandatory, its use (every five years) is recommended, as it refers to the same dimensions as those looked at by the health inspectorate (Eurydice 2022a). How results from internal evaluations are used is up to the setting (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 128).

The parents' council has the right to participate in the internal evaluation process in both childcare centres and pre-primary settings (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 130).

According to the Inspectorate of Educational Quality (*onderwijsinspectie*) reference framework, pre-primary education institutions are expected to develop and systematically and regularly evaluate quality assurance measures, and also to examine the effect on children (European Commission etc. 2019, 128). It is assessed whether developmental goals have been achieved in the following learning areas: sport; people and society; music; Dutch; science and technology; mathematical literacy.

External evaluation

The Flemish Health Inspectorate is responsible for the supervision and inspection of all childcare settings for babies and toddlers. It makes on-site visits to ensure that the facilities adhere to rules, but also tries to improve the pedagogical quality by evaluating learning processes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 125). Since 2017, a monitoring tool has been in place to assess six dimensions (child well-being, child involvement/concentration, emotional support, developmental support, environment, respect for diversity and family cooperation). This instrument was developed in the MeMoQ project (Measuring and Monitoring the Quality of Childcare for Babies and Toddlers - 2013 to 2016). Following the evaluation, a report is prepared to which

the childcare centre has to respond within 14 days and which also contains suggestions for improvement. A final report is then sent to *Opgroeien*, which is then also responsible for making any changes/improvements. As a rule, such visits take place once or twice a year.

Since 2019, each pre-primary setting is obliged to draw up a steering concept, which is then adopted together as a target agreement with the General Education Administration for six years. It is evaluated every year by the institution and at irregular intervals by the. Following the evaluation, an evaluation report is produced, a so-called Education Mirror (*De Onderwijsspiegel*), which summarises the results of the inspection (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 133).

French Community

Child-related assessment

For children under 3 years of age, assessments of child learning outcomes are not the main focus, mainly medical data and language and psychomotor development are recorded. Generally, children (including older children) are assessed through observation, and staff have a choice about how the results are reported (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 103). Results are discussed with parents two to three times a year.

A project called '*Décollage!*' ("Start!") was introduced in 2012, which aims, among other things, not to leave children unnecessarily longer in the *école maternelle*, but instead to ensure a good transition to primary school. After consultation with the Centre for Psychological, Medical and Social Services (*Centre des services psychologiques, médicaux et sociaux*), children can repeat the third year in the *école maternelle* if necessary.

Centre-based internal evaluation

Internal evaluations are carried out throughout the childcare sector and evaluation frameworks are in place. Every three years, childcare settings must evaluate the implementation of their improvement plan in order to renew their quality certificate. In pre-primary settings, the parents' board has the right to participate in the process of internal evaluation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 128ff).

External evaluation

In the childcare sector, centres and staff are reviewed by ONE. As a rule, the focus is on the implementation of the centre-specific programme. As part of the legislation that has been in force since 2019, general assessment tools have been made available for all childcare settings. ONE has appointed coordinators to analyse and evaluate the programmes of new childcare facilities and has appointed pedagogical advisers to work on improving the quality of care and support for staff.

All childcare facilities must comply with the *Code de qualité de l'Accueil* (Quality code for childcare), as set out in the 2003 decree, draw up a programme and carry out specific educational projects within a time-span of three years. These are evaluated by ONE through supervisory services that are independent of the settings, and the childcare provision then receives a certificate if the quality objectives have been achieved. Since 2021, a new type of quality improvement process with operational assessments has been in place. The education projects last five years with an evaluation at mid-term and another at the end.

The quality criteria against which institutions for over 3 year-olds are evaluated are set annually by the Inspectorate and the Ministry of Education. An advisory board (*Conseil de participation*)

also evaluates the management every year with regard to the centre-specific programme, which may then need to be adjusted (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126, 128).

German-speaking Community

Child-related assessment

Children under 3 years of age are not assessed. In kindergartens, information on the developmental status of children is collected mostly through ongoing observation. The basis of this formative evaluation are the developmental goals (see *Curricular Frameworks*). The information is recorded in writing and also communicated to the parents. Some kindergartens, especially if children have not attended the last year of kindergarten, also assess 'school readiness' (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019 105f).

Centre-based internal evaluation

ECEC settings for children under 3 years of age are not required to conduct internal or external evaluations.

The supervisory authority in charge of the external evaluation of the kindergartens also coordinates the internal evaluation. It is carried out by the educational council of the institution, which checks whether methods and results are in line with the objectives and creates a scientific basis for future development through self-evaluation. It is carried out at least every three years (Eurydice 2020). The parents' council has the right to participate in the process of internal evaluation in kindergartens (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 130).

External evaluation

The Autonomous University in the German-speaking Community is responsible for the mandatory external evaluations of kindergartens. The evaluations take place at least once every five years and result in a written report.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

In Belgium, the Act on Special and Inclusive Education (1970, amendments in 1986) states that all children should attend mainstream institutions whenever possible. Enrolment in a separate special education setting should only take place if the regular setting cannot provide the individual support needed. In 1997, all regulations from this Act were integrated into the Primary Education Act (EASNIE 2021).

Flemish Community

In the Flemish Community, the policy of equal opportunities in education (GOK) also applies, particularly for disadvantaged and ethnic minority children. For children who need more support, additional hours are granted in mainstream settings. These can decide how to use these hours (individual support, coaching specialists, etc.). Settings which include a child with special needs can also apply for additional funding (European Commission 2021, 34). In Ghent, there is also a professional network of 40 "bridge specialists" who establish contacts between institutions and families to support disadvantaged families (ibid., 62). Two recent projects aim to (1) make students in training institutions more aware of diversity, poverty and social inequalities

and (2) establish cooperation between different services that support disadvantaged children and families (ibid., 70).

In separate facilities, individual education plans are drawn up for each child. However, children must be 2½ years old and have a medical certificate before they can attend a support facility. In 2020/21, 2,406 children attended 123 special education centres (DET 2022, 13f).

French Community

The French Community is currently preparing on new legislation to replace the current system of integrating children with special educational needs (about 11,000 children) into mainstream provision. From September 2022, special centres will support regular settings at school (FWB 2022b). *Écoles maternelles* and also primary schools can facilitate the integration of children through special materials and also receive pedagogical support (Phare 2021).

Children with special needs can also receive support from specialised staff in regular settings in the childcare and family daycare services. In addition, there are support facilities, especially for physically disabled children. AViQ (*l'Agence pour une Vie de Qualité*) is responsible for the support of children with disabilities in cooperation with ONE for the Walloon Region and PHARE for Brussels. In particular, teams are to be supported (Eurydice 2022b). AViQ aims to contribute to identifying developmental difficulties as early as possible on the basis of 13 strategic objectives (AViQ 2017) and to involve all stakeholders in a transparent way, thus providing needs-based support. Through PHARE, mobile teams can support childcare centres that are approved by ONE. For children under 3, the Care Quality Code also emphasises support for with special educational needs.

At the end of 2021, there were 15 support services authorised by ONE for children aged 0 to 7 (*Services d'accueil spécialisé de la petite enfance - SASPE*) with 415 places, and one non-subsidised service with 56 places (ONE 2022, 35f).

German-speaking community

According to the 1998 Decree, every child has the right to appropriate school support and should be integrated into a regular institution if possible. An evaluation of abilities and impairments is a prerequisite for support. Children with special needs who have been diagnosed by the Centre for Special Needs Education can take part in special education measures if required. An individual support plan is drawn up for each child (Eurydice 2022c).

Children with a migration background – Children from Roma communities

In 2022, 12.8% of the total population had a non-Belgian citizenship. 8.3% came from other EU countries, 4.5% from non-EU countries (ibsa 2023b, own calculations). In the age group of children up to 5 years, 13.9% held no Belgian citizenship, roughly a half (50.8%) came from EU countries (Eurostat 2023c).

0.3% of the non-Belgian population are Roma, mostly living in Flanders and the Brussels area. The Europe-wide network REYN (Romani Early Years Network), an initiative of the International Step-by-Step Association ISSA, aims to improve access to early childhood education and care and enrolment rates of Roma children. Among other things, the Network organises workshops and seminars with all stakeholders and tries to recruit staff from the Roma population for ECEC through campaigns (REYN 2021).

Flemish Community

With support from the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Flemish government launched a pilot project (2017-18) to improve attendance rates of migrant children from developing countries. The project relied on network cooperation between institutions, migrant organisations and municipalities, in addition to parental involvement, which improved relations between all stakeholders (European Commission 2021, 119f).

French Community

Since 2012, a resolution in the French Community has aimed to optimise the integration of immigrant children aged 2½ to 18. Language problems are to be improved with the help of special language programmes. Children with an immigrant background or with a different first language may receive support in preparatory groups (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 113) and also in their mother tongue (ibid, 116). In 2018/19, new guidelines were issued recommending that staff also use books and songs in their languages for under 3 year-olds and encourage parents to speak to their children in their mother tongue so that they can form their cultural identity (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 117).

German-speaking Community

On 1st January 2023, 22% of the population of the German-speaking Community held a non-Belgian citizenship, 81% of them came from other EU countries (the majority from Germany), 19% from non-EU countries (Statistik-Portal der Deutschen Gemeinschaft 2023b).

Children of refugees or asylum seekers or children of non-Belgian origin between the ages of 3 and 18 learn the language in the first two years of kindergarten using the immersion principle. Funding for language courses is only provided for children in the year before they start school.

Parental leave arrangements⁴

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

For employees and the unemployed, maternity leave is 15 weeks, of which up to six weeks can be taken before the birth. One week before and nine weeks after the birth are compulsory. Employees in the private sector receive 82% of their salary in the first month, then 75% for the following weeks - with a cap of €170.69 per day. Public sector employees continue to receive their full salary. This is financed by the Federal Health Insurance, i.e. by employees and employers.

Birth leave (*Geboorteverlof / Congé de naissance, Geburtsurlaub*):

Employees are entitled to 20 working days, three of which are compulsory and fully paid; the other seven are compensated at 82% of salary (capped at €170.69 per day). These days can be taken in the first four months after birth.

Parental leave (*Ouderschapsverlof, congé parental, Elternzeit*):

Each parent can take four months of parental leave, which is remunerated with €978.24 net per month. Parental leave can be taken very flexibly, either full time or part time (50% over eight months, 20% over 20 months or 10% over 40 months). In total, parental leave can be taken until the child's 12th birthday and also by both parents at the same time.

⁴ The brief summary in this section is based on the country note for Belgium by Bernard Fusulier and Dimitri Mortelmans in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

In 2021, 51,366 fathers took four or more days of paternity leave, an average of 13.63 days. In 2022, 86,310 persons made use of parental leave (79,008 in 2021). Most people were mothers (55,908 in 2022 compared to 38,053 in 2010), but the proportion of fathers also increased from 13,891 in 2010 to 30,402 in 2022. Part-time options are most preferred by fathers, with only 10% using full-time parental leave compared to 17% of mothers.

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Belgium

Country expert assessment by

Florence Pirard, Brecht Peleman, Nima Sharmahd, Catherine Reinertz and Katrien Van Laere

Several challenges characterise the Belgian ECEC system. A crucial one is the abrupt and unequal transition to pre-primary school (2½–5 years), based on a **misalignment between the concepts of ‘care’ and ‘education’**. This makes the start of pre-primary schooling hard for all children, but especially for the ones who have not attended childcare (who have a higher chance of being in a societally vulnerable position) and who are considered less ‘ready for school’. It needs to be noted that smooth transitions are included as a quality criterion in the Flemish toddler participation policy (policies to increase the enrolment and attendance in pre-primary schools) and are a priority of the French Community government. Currently, experimental practices are being developed in Flanders to work on smooth transitions and the concept/approach of *educare* to challenge this split system. In the French Community, an official charta is to support the implementation of transitional practices and familiarisation procedures by those involved at the start of pre-primary school. In 2022, *ONE* published a document aimed at clarifying the notion of *educare* (Genette 2022), which is little known on the ground.

The implementation of an *educare* approach is also hindered by **challenging adult-child ratios** both in both childcare and pre-primary education. In Flanders, the adult-child ratio in childcare is 1:8 (without additional rules that take into account, for example, the age of the children and group size). No official ratio is specified for pre-primary schools; however, the average ratio is around 1:24. In the French Community the adult-child ratio is 1:7 in the childcare services but as in Flanders, there is no official required ratio for pre-primary classrooms. In 2018, one third of the school professionals participating in a survey of a representative sample of schools working with the youngest children said that they had no more than 20 2½–3 year-olds in their class, whereas two thirds had at least 21; a quarter of the professionals said they had more than 30 children in their class (Housen and Royen 2019). Attention also needs to be paid to the ratio in out-of-school childcare settings with a proposal to revise the calculation of childcare standards for 2½ to 3 year-olds.

The **staff shortage issue** makes it more difficult to challenge the large number of children assigned to one professional. Many ECEC centres have vacancies for Pre-primary Teachers and Childcare Workers, intensified during the COVID-19 crisis. Never before was the impact of staff shortage so problematic in terms of availability and quality of ECEC, especially in Flanders and in Brussels according to official statistics. The shortage is largely related to the challenging working conditions of ECEC professionals (e.g. salary, lack of child-free hours, problematic adult-child ratios). Recent Master's thesis research at the University of Ghent showed that one in three newly graduated Childcare Workers in Flanders say they do not wish to work in the sector.

In addition, the **qualification level of ECEC professionals** represents a challenge. Childcare Workers in Belgium hold a low initial qualification compared to other EU countries. At the same time, there is a lack of resources and culture to create good quality continuing professional development paths for ECEC professionals. Reforms are currently underway in the French Community.

For Flanders, these challenges are put under additional pressure by the Flemish Government's limited financial investment in childcare.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the total population in Belgium was 11,617,623. A steady increase can be observed since the beginning of the century (2000:10,239,085; 2010: 10,839,905; 2020: 11,522,440) (Eurostat 2023a).

For the individual Communities, national statistics give the following data:

Table 10

Belgium: Population development between 2000-2022

	2000	2010	2020	2022
Brussels Capital Region	959.318	1.089.538	1.218.255	1,222,637
Flanders Region	5.940.251	6.251.983	6.629.143	6,698,876
Walloon Region	3.339.516	3.498.384	3.645.243	3,662,495
Belgium, total	10.239.085	10.839.905	11.492.641	11,584,008

Source: ibsa 2023a

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total birth rate in the EU27 (as of 2020) was 1.53. The highest total birth rate among the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.60, Belgium is slightly above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)⁵.

Children under 6 years of age

Table 11

Belgium: Number of children under 6 years of age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Under 1 year-olds	118,483
1 year-olds	115,549
2 year-olds	119,365

⁵ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

Age	Number of children
3 year-olds	121,146
4 year-olds	122,925
5 year-olds	125,935
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	723,403

Source: Eurostat 2023a

The proportion of children under 3 years of age in the total population was 3.0% in 2022, and that of children under 6 years of age was 6.2%. These shares were well above the EU average in 2000, though they fell slightly during the last two decades (see *Table 12*).

Table 12

Belgium: Children under 6 years of age – share in total population from 2000 to 2022, in %*

Year	Comparison Belgium/EU	Under 3 year- olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Belgium	3.4	3.4	6.8
	Ø EU15 ⁶	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Belgium	3.3	3.3	6.6
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Belgium	3.4	3.5	6.9
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Belgium	3.0	3.2	6.2
	Ø EU27	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, * Own calculations, deviations due to rounding

Single households with children under 6 years of age

More than three quarters (78.8%) of households with children under 6 were couple households in 2022. Households with single parents accounted for 5.6% - as a rule, these are single mothers. The proportion of single fathers is very low at 0.5% in total.

Table 13

Belgium: Households with children under age 6, 2022

Household type	Total households	Total households, in %*
All households	1,145,300	
Couple households	902,700	78.8
Other household type	178,000	15.5
Single households, total	64,600	5.6
Single households, women	58,900	5.1
Single households, men	5,700	0.5

Source: Eurostat 2023e, *Own calculation

⁶ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Belgium, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 74.2% and for women 66.8% (Eurostat 2023j).

In 2022, 68.7% of women and 86.4% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the 27 EU-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers thus were slightly below the EU-average (87.2%) and those of mothers were above the EU-average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023e).

Table 14a

Belgium: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Belgium	68,7	87,5
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁷	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Belgium	68.7	86.4
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ⁸	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023e

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 14b*:

Table 14b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
[†] Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)				
with dependent children	75.6	92.1	⁺⁺ 72.3	⁺⁺ 79.2
with children under 2 years	72.4	93.1	⁺⁺ 72.1 (2023)	⁺⁺ 79.4 (2023)
with children 3–4 years	70.7	95.0		

*Eurostat 2023e, 2023j

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

⁷ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

⁸ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

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Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁹

In 2022, 18.1% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was below the EU27 average (23.3%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 18.7% (EU: 21.6%). In 2020, 3.8% of children under 6 and 2.3% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, i).

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⁹ ‘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. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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