

FRANCE

Key contextual data

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Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms chosen in this report for the main forms of centre-based ECEC settings are: **childcare centre** (*crèche collective*, 3 months–2 years)¹ and **pre-primary school** (*école maternelle*, 2–5)². Any additional forms of provision are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in France

1770	Founding of the first centres for young children: the <i>écoles à tricoter</i> by Pastor Oberlin in Ban-de-la-Roche (Vosges)
1844	Establishment of the first <i>crèche</i> (childcare centre) in Paris by Firmin Marbeau
1826	The first <i>salles d'asile</i> , the forerunners of <i>écoles maternelles</i> , are founded in Paris for poor children. Ten years later there were 34 in Paris, and by 1935, 102 in the whole of France.
1848	Marie Pape Carpentier introduces a first separation from primary learning. After being director of a <i>salle d'asile</i> (in La Flèche, then Le Mans), she becomes the first director of a specific training centre for the heads of the <i>salles d'asile</i> .
1881	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Salles d'asile</i>, renamed <i>écoles maternelles</i>, are integrated into the education system. Jules Ferry (Minister of Public Instruction) defines them as free of charge, secular and non-compulsory institutions. – Primary school teachers (trained in <i>Écoles normales d'institutrices</i>) replace the previous personnel in the <i>salles d'asile</i>. – <i>Écoles maternelles</i> continue to take in children from low social classes. – Pauline Kergomard, a general inspector of <i>écoles maternelles</i>, strongly defends play and the specificities of early learning.
1887	The training centres for teachers (<i>Écoles normales d'institutrices</i>) also include teachers for the <i>écoles maternelles</i> .
1905	With the development of the French Republican School (<i>l'École de la République</i>), private religious schools decline. Following the Law defining the separation between State and churches (Catholic and others), the State no longer pays for churches, priests etc., but private (mainly religious) schools continue to receive public funding if they have a contract with the State. Other private initiatives continue, but without public funding. Public <i>écoles maternelles</i> are free of charge (except for lunch and out-of-school hours).
1908	First curriculum introduced specifically for the <i>écoles maternelles</i> .
1910	Introduction of the first specialist inspectors for the <i>écoles maternelles</i> in each Département
1921	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Staff in <i>écoles maternelles</i> are given the same professional status as primary school teachers. – Creation of AGIEM (Association Générale des <i>Instituteurs d'École Maternelle</i>), the professional association of preschool teachers. – Revision of the preschool curriculum (the last until 1977)

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 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 the case of France, the relevant formats are **0–2** and **2/3–5** years, since children start the *école élémentaire* when they are 6 years old.

² To establish a degree of comparability between the SEEPRO-3 key contextual data reports, the term **pre-primary education** is used when referring in general to the *écoles maternelles* (2–5). In France, however, the *école maternelle* is integrated into the primary school for 2 to 11 year-olds (*école maternelle + école élémentaire = école primaire*).



Post 1945	Crèches, previously run by charitable organisations, are included in the state health system.
1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Entitlement to a place in pre-primary provision for 5 year-olds – Elected parents' committees are created in each <i>école maternelle</i>. – New regulations under the Minister of Health (Simone Veil) now allow parents, who were not authorised to enter <i>crèches</i>' rooms for hygienic reasons, to be admitted.
1977	New curricular objectives and methods are issued for the <i>école maternelle</i> and its three roles (education, early learning and care).
1980-83	Decentralisation moves – municipalities (<i>communes</i>) take over responsibility for crèche settings in cooperation with the state through the CAFs (<i>Caisses des allocations familiales</i>).
1986	<i>Contrat enfance</i> – state funding to provide diversification of crèche settings to meet family needs
1986	Orientations for the <i>école maternelle</i> : socialisation and early learning
1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Inclusion of the <i>écoles maternelles</i> in the 'primary school' (<i>école maternelle + école élémentaire</i>) – Definition of 3 cycles of learning from 2 to 12 (early learning cycle for pre-primary education) – Same training in university institutes for pre-primary and primary teachers, who are now called <i>professeurs des écoles</i> – Entitlement to a place in pre-primary provision extended to cover 3 and 4 year-olds, with priority of inclusion of 2 year-olds in disadvantaged zones – An inter-ministerial policy (Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Solidarities and Health) is launched to develop art and culture from birth (aims: democratisation of culture, fight against inequalities and exclusion, parental support, improvement of quality in care settings) through the collaboration of artists and practitioners of the culture sector with ECEC professionals and parents, with notably successful implementation.
1991	Another inter-ministerial policy (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Solidarities) launches classes and <i>actions passerelles</i> for bridging the care and education sectors. In reality this was not supported by the Ministry of Education, since its priorities at the time were the integration of <i>écoles maternelles</i> in the <i>école primaire</i> , the new school curriculum (2–12) with the implementation of the cycles of learning, assessments of children, the new common initial professional education/training for teachers of both schools.
1995	Curriculum for 'primary school' (<i>école maternelle + école élémentaire</i>). The <i>école maternelle</i> is presented as the foundation stage of the education system and as preparing for school.
2000	A new Decree recognises the educational role of crèches and parental participation.
2002	New curriculum for the <i>école maternelle</i> (within primary school): focus on language acquisition Assessment of children's learning (according to the curriculum)
2008	Revised national curriculum for <i>écoles maternelles</i>
2010	A new decree introduces flexibility in the care sector.
2013	Revised version of the 2008 curriculum for <i>écoles maternelles</i> . Play reappears as well as parents' participation and specific attention is given to 2 year-olds. Since 2013 municipalities are obliged to develop a local educational plan (<i>Projet Educatif De Territoire – PEDT</i>) towards more continuity in the diverse educational experiences of children and young people, during school hours and out of school hours, including children in <i>écoles maternelles</i> . Some municipalities (for instance Paris) also include children under 3 and support the development of <i>actions passerelles</i> (shared experiences) between <i>crèches</i> and <i>écoles maternelles</i> .
2016	Sylviane Giampino's report (<i>Développement du jeune enfant, modes d'accueil, formation des professionnels</i>) (Child development, care services, professionals' training) proposes 108 recommendations for the care sector.



2017	<p>Based on Giampino's report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Ministry of Families, Childhood and Women's Right launches a <i>Cadre national pour l'accueil du jeune enfant</i>, with 10 principles. – The inter-ministerial policy on art and culture for young children was re-launched by the Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Ministry of Families, Childhood and Women's Rights.
2019	<p>Law endorsing compulsory attendance for 3 to 5 year-olds in the <i>école maternelle</i> comes into force.</p>
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – From 2020, Ministry of Culture and Ministries of Solidarities and Health participate in the National Strategy of Prevention and the Fight Against Poverty, launched in 2019, by stimulating and supporting actions, training etc. – Linked to the National Strategy (Poverty), the three ministries also participate in prompting actions within the framework of the "chantier des 1000 premiers jours", which includes care services.
2021	<p>The Decree on care settings (August 2021) regulates both <i>crèches</i> and home-based providers and adopts the <i>Charte nationale pour l'accueil du jeune enfant</i> as first curricular orientation for both. The decree introduces some deregulation in the staffing ratios, depending on the size of <i>crèches</i>.</p>
2022	<p>A "public service for early childhood" (<i>service public de la petite enfance- SPPE</i>) is one of President Macron's campaign commitments. After a consultation phase with key stakeholders, a National Council for the Refoundation of Early Childhood (<i>conseil national de refondation sur la petite enfance – CNR</i>) is established by the Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy and Disabled Persons.</p>
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – January: Ministry of National Education and Youth affairs launches a new plan for the <i>école maternelle</i> (<i>Plan maternelle</i>) aiming for children's "success" and "flourishing" based on training, more continuity in ECEC, relationships with parents and the transition to primary school. – June: Prime Minister E. Borne announces the SPPE: 5.5 billion euros for 100,000 places in <i>crèches</i> by 2027 (target: 200,000 places in 2030): confirmation of municipalities and inter-municipalities as organising authorities within the framework of "a national strategy set by order of the Minister for the Family which determines in particular the priorities and multi-annual national objectives in terms of the quantitative and qualitative development of ECEC provision and training for early childhood professionals", with Departmental Family Services Committees (CDSF) responsible for monitoring the multi-year plan for the reception offer of the municipalities.

Sources: Luc 1994; Bennett and Moss 2010; Bouve 2010; Garnier 2016; Willekens and Scheiwe 2020

ECEC system type and auspices³

Early childhood education and care in France for children up to school entry at the age of 6 years is a so-called 'split' system, regulated by different jurisdictions. The centralised French education system, of which pre-primary education (*écoles maternelles*) for (2)3 to under 6 year-olds is a part, comes under the auspices of the Ministry of National Education and Youth Affairs (*Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, MENJ*).

Educational institutions, both pre-primary and primary, are state-maintained, i.e. publicly funded and organised. Government responsibilities include provision for the continuing professional development of ECEC staff, curriculum content and inspections regarding quality and administration.

³ The Eurydice country report on ECEC in France³ provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are indicated within the text and in the references section.



ECEC provision for children under 2/3 years of age (*l'accueil du jeune enfant*) is not part of the education system and, since 2022, comes under the jurisdiction of two ministries: the Ministry of Health and Prevention (*Ministère de la Santé et de la Prévention, MSP*) and the Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy and Disabled Persons (*Ministère des Solidarités, de l'Autonomie et des Personnes handicapées, MSAP*). Decentralisation moves in the early 1980s led to the municipalities (*communes*) taking over local responsibility for the provision for under 3 year-olds, in cooperation with the state through the CAFs (*Caisses des Allocations familiales*). This was followed by a diversification of the traditional centre-based childcare settings (see section on *Main types of provision*).

General objectives and legislative framework

The overall system of early childhood education and care has been strongly influenced by two divergent philosophies: that of child protection and paramedical care in the provision for under 3 year-olds, and school dominance in the pre-primary education for 3 to 6 year-olds. These traditions still permeate the system, although more educational and family-related approaches have been finding their way into the various forms of provision for under 3 year-olds.

The Preamble to the French Constitution of 1946 states that it is a duty of the state to organise free, public and secular education at all levels (§13). The main aim of pre-primary education in the *écoles maternelles* is to support children in realising their full potential and to prepare them for school. A strong emphasis is placed on language acquisition and development and it is seen as the first stage in the process of mastering the basic skills of reading, writing, counting and respecting others (Ministry of National Education, Youth Affairs and Sport 2021).

Each child's entitlement to early childhood education and the duties of pre-primary institutions are to be found in the Education Act (*Loi d'orientation sur l'éducation, 1989, with amendments*), in the Law on the Restructuring of the School System (*Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la refondation de l'École de la République, 2013*) and in the Law for a School of Trust (*Loi pour une école de la confiance, 2019*). A recent *Plan maternelle* (Ministry of National Education and Youth Affairs 2023) aiming for children's 'success' and 'blossoming' places a focus on training (all levels), continuity within ECEC, relationships with parents and the transition to primary school.

Childcare centres (*crèches collectives*) were legally bound by the 2010 Decree on Facilities and Care Services for Children under 6 years of age, which focused primarily on health and safety standards. The 2022 Decree (31 August; Ministry of Health and Prevention and Ministry of Solidarity, Autonomy and Disabled persons 2022) currently regulates both childcare centres and home-based childcare providers. Some deregulation (due to the lack of personnel) coexists with the introduction of the first curricular orientations (*Charte Nationale pour l'accueil du jeune enfant*), including eight principles concerning the children's well-being and two others concerning personal well-being, proposed as curricular framework since 2017 (Ministry for Families, Children and Women's Rights 2017), as well as the support of artistic and cultural education (MCC & MFCWR 2017). From 2020, Ministry of Culture and Ministries of Solidarities and Health participate in the National Strategy of Prevention and the Fight Against Poverty, launched in 2019, by stimulating and supporting actions, training etc. Linked to the National Strategy (Poverty), the three ministries also participate in prompting actions within the framework of the "*chantier des 1000 premiers jours*" [construction site of the first 1000 days], which includes care services (Ministry of Solidarities and Health 2020).

After a consultation phase, Prime Minister E. Borne announces on June 1st 2023, the creation of a public service for early childhood (*service public de la petite enfance- SPPE*), which was part of

President Macron's campaign commitments – at the crossroads of policies supporting the birth rate, of full employment, of equality between women and men and of equal opportunities from an early age. This project takes into account recommendations of SCFCA's three reports (2023 a, b, c), and from a General Inspectorate of Social Affairs report (Bohic et al 2023) on quality of care and prevention of abuse in crèches.

The announced SPPE pledges 5.5 billion euros for 100,000 places in crèches for 2027 (target: 200,000 places in 2030).

- The municipalities and inter-municipalities are confirmed as organising authorities, within the framework of "a national strategy set by order of the Minister for the Family which determines in particular the priorities and multi-annual national objectives in terms of the quantitative and qualitative development of ECEC provision and training for early childhood professionals".
- Departmental Family Services Committees (CDSF) are to be responsible for monitoring the multi-year plan for the services offered by the municipalities.
- In the event of difficulties, the CAFs can intervene to guarantee the opening of new places.

Further policy goals are

- To increase the number (and tasks) of *Relais Petite Enfance RPE* (one per municipality of more than 10,000 inhabitants) and *crèches* supporting the target of integrating 1,000 settings
- Support for local initiatives against the non-use of childcare facilities
- The development of various flexible facilities for child early socialisation before *école maternelle*.

The four axes to improve quality are:

- (1) Staff training (a common basis); a national research programme on child development to "enrich training"; increase in hours of practice analyses; obligation of pedagogical days
- (2) Micro-crèches: increase in the number of professionals and financing of quality-improvement projects
- (3) Increased quality controls
- (4) To increase the attractiveness of the professions and reduce staff shortages; creating an observatory of professions and the quality of life at work; increasing the training offer (involvement of the Regions); increasing wages.

Discussions are under way about the new law on full employment which includes an article with the above-mentioned measures for childcare and about the 2023-2027 agreement regarding the management of State objectives by the CNAFs.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Since the Law for a School of Trust came into force in July 2019, attending an *école maternelle* has been compulsory from the age of 3. This means children not only have a right but a duty to receive "instruction". In the official text it is "instruction" which is compulsory, not attendance, although home schooling is rare; parents have to be granted permission and very few children experience home instruction.

Children under 3 years of age do not have an entitlement to ECEC and enrolment is voluntary. Primary school (*école élémentaire*) starts at age 6.

Main types of provision

Childcare sector

Childcare centres (*crèches*) in both public and private ownership accept children from the age of 2–3 months up to the age of 3. In order to open a facility for under-threes, approval is needed by the regional Maternal and Child Protection services (*Protection maternelle et Infantile, PMI*) based on meeting the required standards regarding health and safety. The recent report of the General Inspection of Social Affairs (Bohic et al. 2023) recommends the creation of posts of Pedagogical Counsellors in PMI (as well in municipalities).

Also included are the non-profit childcare settings founded by parent initiatives (***crèches parentales***) where parents take it in turn to care for up to 20 children under the age of 3. The most recent Decree (Ministry of Solidarity and Health 2021, 31 August) categorises *crèches collectives* according to their size: *micro-crèches* (max. 12 places), *petites crèches* (13–24 places), *crèches* (25–39 places), *grandes crèches* (40–59 places) and *très grandes crèches*.

These various forms of provision for under-threes are generally open from the beginning of September till the beginning of August (in a number of cities, some groups remain open during August). Daily opening hours are decided by the provider and services are usually available from 8:00 till 19:00.

Kindergartens (*jardins enfants*) are a kind of complementary facility to the *écoles maternelles*. They take up to 80 children aged 2 to 6 years. Although there are some municipal centres, these are mostly non-profit private centres (*jardins d'enfants associatifs*) which offer long opening hours similar to those of the childcare centres. They are staffed by qualified *éducatrices/éducateurs*, who introduce the children to educational activities. This type of institution, which exists only in some cities, will be abolished in 2024, due to the compulsory instruction. After that they can be transformed into *crèches*.

Multi-functional centres (*structures/établissements multi-accueil*) are *crèches* which provide more flexible care arrangements: alongside regular full-day places these can also be part-time or sessional arrangements within the same setting. They aim to accommodate the diverse needs of families, and to meet more specifically the needs of single parents, of parents looking for a job, and of parents working atypical hours.

Sessional care facilities (*halte-garderies*) for children up to age 3 are organised by local authorities or non-profit service providers. They are mostly used on a short-term basis by working parents, more rarely on an hourly basis by parents not working in the labour market. They can be linked with the *multi-accueil* settings.

Home-based childcare settings are the main form of ECEC provision for a maximum of four under 3 year-olds. They are provided by approved Childcare Workers (*assistant(e)s maternel(le)s agréé(e)s*) who are registered with the district authorities. Their employers are the parents. They can work alone, group themselves in associations and participate to activities with the children proposed by ***Relais petite enfance (RPE)*** (previous name: *Relais assistante maternelle*), a kind of resource hub which offers support and *accompagnement* (as well providing families with information about the various care settings in the area). Recently, a new form of full-time collective care arrangement known as *MAM (Maisons d'assistantes maternelles)* has been established, whereby two to four Childcare Workers are authorised to work together and care for “their” four children in accommodation outside their own homes, which they can rent or buy or which may be allocated by the municipality in the smaller cities.

Family crèche networks (*crèches familiales*) comprise several approved childcare workers and take up to a maximum of 150 children. The *crèches familiales* employ approved home-based childcare providers who welcome children to their home for part of the day and make regular

use of a centre-based setting for different activities. This type of setting is supervised and managed in the same way as *crèches collectives* (Eurydice 2022).

Open-door services (*lieux d'accueil enfants parents* – LAEP), which are similar to the *lieux de rencontre* in Belgium or the *CBF (centro bambini e famiglie)* in Italy, are municipal or associative settings for parents and children – and sometimes home-based Childcare Workers (if there is no RPE in the area). They are open on certain days of the week and admit under 3 year-olds together with a parent or guardian, aiming to support parents in the socialisation of young children before they enter the *écoles maternelle*. They are attended mainly by children who are not enrolled in a regular care setting.

In some sparsely populated areas there are **mobile services** (*services itinérants*) which provide materials for smaller settings.

Education sector

Pre-primary schools (*écoles maternelles*) are the main form of provision for children between 3 and 6 years of age and since September 2019 instruction has been mandatory for this age group. The children are usually organised into same-age classes divided into *la petite section* (2 and 3 year-olds), *la moyenne section* (4 year-olds) and *la grande section* (5 year-olds). A *toute petite section* (2 year-olds) may exist in some cities.

The school year starts at the beginning of September and ends at the beginning of July. The *écoles maternelles* are open for 24 hours a week: either 6 hours a day on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays or for nine half-days (including Wednesday mornings).

In 2022, the number of pre-primary settings in France totalled 12,881 (RERS 2023, 27).

Bridge classes in pre-primary schools (*classes passerelles in écoles maternelles*) for 2 year-olds are not the *toutes petites sections* mentioned above. In a *classe passerelle* three adults work together: an Educator (*EJE*), a Primary Teacher and a Classroom Assistant (*agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles* – ATSEM). The group size is lower than in the *toutes petites sections*. This kind of provision has been established in disadvantaged areas for children who have not previously attended a care setting.

The idea behind this early schooling for 2 year-olds (*scolarisation précoce*) is to offer a publicly maintained and accessible service in order to pursue the objective of promoting equal opportunities from the earliest age. In 2016, the government launched an information campaign for families, mobilising the CAFs, to accelerate the education of children under 3 years of age, the various partners concerned (local education authorities, municipalities, PMI, family allowance funds, associations) having to co-operate regularly in order to raise awareness among the most vulnerable families of the benefits of early schooling and to inform them of places available near their homes (Gouvernement 2016).

Children's groups in primary schools are available for 5 year-olds in rural areas. If there are enough places, 4 year-olds may also attend. Sometimes these children's groups cooperate to enable the founding of an *école maternelle* and the children are transported there.

Provider structures

The greater majority of ECEC provision in France for children aged 0 to 5 years is state-maintained or state-subsidised. In terms of provision for 3 to 5 year-olds, a total of 12,881 *écoles maternelles* were publicly run in 2022, whereas only 43 were private, most of which were state subsidised. Overall, only 13.3% of children attended a private institution in 2022; at 26.2%, the

share of 2 year-olds was the largest (see *Table 1*). Only 0.9% of children were enrolled in non-subsidised private institutions in 2020 (RERS 2023, 29, 75, 84).

Table 1

France: Number of children in pre-primary schools (*pré-élémentaire*) by age and provider, 2022

	Public	Private	Share of children in private (total) settings in %*	Total
2 year-olds	53,692	19,076	26.2	72,768
3 year-olds	639,175	94,535	12.9	733,710
4 year-olds	656,056	97,682	13.0	753,738
5 year-olds	670,718	99,579	12.9	770,297
Total	2,019,641	310,872	13.3	2,330,513

Source: RERS 2023, 75, *own calculations

Participation rates in regulated provision

Childcare sector

Home-based ECEC provided by approved childcare providers remained the predominant form of provision (54% of the provision). Institutional settings (childcare centres, micro-crèches, family crèches and parental crèches) are the second largest contributor, providing places for 35% of children under 3 years of age (+19 %-points compared to 2013). *Écoles maternelles* are the third largest contributor, providing places for 5% of under 3 year-olds (SCFCA 2023, 63).

Table 2

France: Places for children under 3 years of age in regulated ECEC provision, 2020

Setting	Number of places
External home-based childcare provision	710,500
Childcare provision in parental home	46,900
Childcare centre (<i>crèche collectif/familial/parental, micro-crèche</i>)	479,000
Pre-primary school (<i>école maternelle</i>)	71,200
Total	1,307,600

Source: SCFCA 2023, 63

According to Eurostat data, the enrolment rates of under 3 year-olds attending a centre-based ECEC setting increased considerably between 2005 and 2022 – from 32% to 56.2%. The high participation rate of children aged 3 up to school entry remained at the high level of more than 90% (see *Table 3*).

Table 3

France: 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 minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29 hours	16	56
	Over 30 hours	16	39
	No enrolment in ECEC	68	5
2010	1 to 29 hours	17	47
	Over 30 hours	26	47

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to under 3 years, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
	No enrolment in ECEC	58	6
2015	1 to 29 hours	16.0	36.9
	Over 30 hours	25.7	56.7
	No enrolment in ECEC	58.2	6.4
2022	1 to 29 hours	18.7	32.3
	Over 30 hours	37.5	61.4
	No enrolment in ECEC	43.7	6.3

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

Education sector (ISCED 02)

In 2022, 2,231,383 children aged 3 to under 6 years attended a pre-primary education setting. According to national statistics, 9.9% of 2 year-olds attended an *école maternelle*, whereas nearly all 3- to under 6-year olds were enrolled (see Table 4).

Table 4

France: Number and enrolment rates of children attending *écoles maternelles* by age, 2022

Age groups	Number of children	Enrolment rate, in %
2 year-olds	69,978	9.9
3 year-olds	726,257	98.0
4 year-olds	746,007	100.0
5 year-olds	759,119	100.0
3 to 5 year-olds	2,231,383	99.7

Source: RERS 2023, 73, 75

Financing and costs for parents

According to OECD data, total public expenditure on early childhood education and care amounted to 1.29% of GDP in 2020, 0.6% allocated to childcare and 0.7% to pre-primary education (OECD 2023).

Centre-based **childcare** settings generally receive subsidies from the Family Allowance Fund (*Caisse d'Allocations familiales*) which partly cover running costs. Additionally, parents pay income-related monthly fees. In 2017, for example, a dual-income family earning two minimum wages paid a monthly fee of €133 for a place in a crèche (Eurydice 2023).

The running costs of the *écoles maternelles* are generally covered by the municipalities, which are primarily responsible for buildings and equipment, whereas the State, the Ministry of Education, is responsible for staff salaries. Attendance is free of charge, but meals or additional childcare arrangements have to be paid by the parents. Municipalities may apply income-related sliding fee scales. The fees are minimal in private subsidised pre-primary settings.

Parents who choose family day care as their preferred form of provision receive a monthly child care allowance which varies according to the status of the family day carer, the child's age and the parents' disposable income.

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 10% of net household income on childcare costs (OECD.Stat 2023).⁴

Staff to child ratios and group size

The maximum number of children in any one form of provision in the childcare sector is regulated according to the specific setting. *Crèches* generally have no more than 60 places, *micro-crèches* a maximum of 9 places, parental *crèches* a maximum of 20 places which can be expanded to 25 in exceptional conditions, kindergartens a maximum of 80 places, and family *crèche* networks a maximum of 150 places (Eurydice 2023).

The trend towards smaller classes also continued in the 2022 school year: the national average was 22 children per class in public settings and 24.9 in private settings (overall: 22.4) (DEPP 2023, 48).

Curricular frameworks

Childcare sector

In 2017, a “National Framework for the Care of Young Children” (*Cadre national pour l'accueil du jeune enfant*) was published by the Ministry for Families, Children and Women's Rights (Ministry for Families, Children and Women's Rights 2017). It provides guidelines for working with under 3 year-olds, both in home-based and centre-based childcare settings. This first curricular framework was introduced in the national regulation in 2021 (Decree 31 August 2021, Ministry of Solidarity and Health 2021). Based on the principles in the guidelines, each childcare setting develops its own pedagogical programme which has to be approved by the *département* authorities for maternal and child protection. The *PMI* is required to verify the process through compulsory visits to the setting.

In order to facilitate the transition for 2 or 3 year-olds to the *école maternelle*, collaboration between families, childcare staff and teachers in the *école maternelle* at the local level is recommended in the recent action plan published by the Ministry of National Education and Youth Affairs (2023).

Education sector

The first official curriculum for the *école maternelle* was published in 1908 – decades before most other European countries. In recent years, the mandatory guidelines have been regularly revised, the last edition of the new curriculum being published in 2021 (Ministry of National Education, Youth Affairs and Sport 2015, 2021).

The French primary school curriculum is organised around three cycles – the ‘cycle of early learning’ (*cycle des apprentissages premiers*) for pre-primary education and the two other cycles for primary education.

The ‘cycle of early learning’ includes five specific areas of learning: (1) mobilising language in all its dimensions – oral and written; (2) acting, expressing oneself, understanding through physical activity; (3) acting, expressing oneself, understanding through artistic activities; (4) learning to think in a structured way; (5) exploring the world. For each of these learning areas the curriculum

⁴ 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.

provides a general definition and educational objectives in order to support effective progress in learning.

Expected outcomes at the end of the *école maternelle* are formulated for each of the five dimensions. For example, for the first dimension (oral and written language), it is expected that each child is able to (Ministry of National Education, Youth Affairs and Sport 2021):

- Communicate with adults and other children through language, making themselves understood
- Express themselves in syntactically correct and precise language and rephrase to be better understood
- Practise various uses of oral language: telling, describing, evoking, explaining, ask questions, suggest solutions, discuss a point of view
- Recite several rhymes and poems from memory and in an expressive way
- Understand written texts with no other help than the language heard
- Demonstrate curiosity about the written word. Be able to repeat the words of a written sentence after being read by an adult, the words of the known title of a book or text
- Participate verbally in the production of a written document. Know that writing is not the same as speaking
- Identify regularities in oral language in French (possibly in another language),
- Manipulate syllables
- Discriminate between sounds (syllables, vowel sounds)
- Recognise the letters of the alphabet and know the correspondences between the three ways of writing them: cursive, script, block capitals. Copy using a keyboard
- Write their first name in cursive, without a model
- Write a word on their own using letters or groups of letters borrowed from known words.

Digital education

There are indications in the national pre-primary curriculum that digital technology should be integrated into the children's learning experiences. For example, in the 'language' dimension of the curriculum it is recommended that children contact each other using digital tools (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 100).

Since 2015, children are thus required to know how to use digital media which, "like other media, have their place in the *école maternelle* provided that the objectives and their methods of use are supporting a learning activity" (Ministry of National Education, Youth Affairs and Sport 2015) For the cycle of early learning, this includes the learning areas of language (practice transcribing known words, sentences, short texts and entering them on the computer) and digital arts as well as exploration of the world (learning to manipulate a computer mouse, using a digital tablet, etc.).

Documents accompanying the curriculum, for example those issued by the Rennes Academy (2015), offer some guidelines and indicate the potentials and precautions, e.g. "Real and concrete manipulations are essential"; "Digital should never replace the relationship"; "Handling digital tools allows children to acquire work habits that they can transfer".

Monitoring – evaluation

Child-related assessment

There are no national regulations for the assessment of children under the age of 3. Ongoing observations are loosely based on the National Framework for the Reception of Young Children (2017) and the staff team meets regularly to discuss practices.

In the *écoles maternelles*, teaching staff monitor each child's progress against the expected outcomes in each of the five learning dimensions of the pre-primary curriculum. Observations are documented in written form (and are passed on to other settings if the child changes school). A report for each child has to be produced annually, accompanied by a kind of school report (*livret scolaire*) which follows the child through to the end of primary school. At the end of the final year in pre-primary education, a summary of each child's achievements is made according to a national framework of criteria set out in a decree from December 2015. Competences in each of the five learning areas are assessed according to three categories: no success as yet; on the way to success; often succeeds.

Centre-level assessment

There are no regulations or recommendations for centre-level assessment in childcare services for the under 3 year-olds. However, they take place and focus on topics such as teamwork, the quality of leadership, staff satisfaction with working conditions, and parental satisfaction.

In the *écoles maternelles*, staff are expected to evaluate their own setting-specific programme aligned to the national curriculum for pre-primary education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126).

External evaluation

The Ministry for Solidarity and Health is responsible for the inspection of **childcare settings** for under 3 year-olds, which is delegated to the local child protection services. Besides assessments of the buildings, equipment and hygiene and safety requirements, staff qualifications are also checked as well as the specific working conditions. Evaluations are conducted primarily through visits.

In the French education system, external evaluations are compulsory. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the inspection of the *écoles maternelles*, which is organised by local educational authorities. Inspections fall under the responsibility of two inspectorates: the General Inspectorate of National Education (*Inspection Générale de l'Éducation Nationale*, IGEN) and the General Inspectorate of Educational Administration and Research (IGAENR). The Directorate of Evaluation, Prospective Planning and Performance (*Direction de l'Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance*, DEPP) is responsible for educational statistics, conducting evaluations of school achievements and developing criteria for staff self-assessment.

Evaluations focus on curriculum content, teaching methods and learning. Management and staff are also assessed. The heads of the *écoles maternelles* are responsible for producing an annual report which is submitted to the local authorities. The frequency of inspections is not generally regulated, but they usually take place every two or three years. The results are rarely publicised. There is no standardised protocol for the external evaluation of pre-primary education, although the Ministry of Education provides indicators (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126).

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

– *Childcare sector*

Children under 3 years of age with disabilities can access mainstream childcare services (Decree 2005-1752). There is no legal obstacle to admitting a child with disabilities into *crèches*. Refusal to do so can constitute discrimination or a breach of equality in the delivery of public services (EASNIE 2021). If necessary, the admission of a young child with disabilities can be supported by a medical-educational service, the child and maternal protection service (PMI) or even by a hospital service. When a child's health requires specific or serious medical care, it is also possible to admit them to a childcare centre offering medical services (EASNIE 2021).

Regional centres for persons with disabilities (*Maisons départementales des personnes handicapées, MDPH*) were founded in 2005. A multi-disciplinary team (medical doctors, therapists, etc.) assesses the specific needs of the child in question and proposes an individual educational plan in close collaboration with the parents.

Since 2019, all childcare settings caring for at least one child with a recognised disability are eligible for the 'disability inclusion bonus'. The bonus is capped at 1,300 € per place. It is intended to cover extra costs such as staff training or special equipment. About a quarter of places in *crèches* benefited from this bonus in 2019 (European Commission 2021, 107).

In 2020, the association *Ebullescence* launched a network of specially designed and equipped inclusive ECEC settings to cater for the special needs of children aged 18 months to 6 years old with neurodevelopmental disorders (cerebral palsy, autism, motor or language disorder). A special focus will be given to daily meetings between the specialist staff involved, as well as close co-operation with the parents (European Commission 2021, 112).

– *Education sector (ISCED 02)*

In the education sector, children under 6 years of age with (special educational needs and) disabilities are mostly included in mainstream settings, or may have a place in an 'inclusion class' (*Unité localisée pour l'inclusion scolaire, ULIS*). Children with disabilities are enrolled in public or private pre-primary settings as a priority. Help from external support services can be arranged. The law also provides for enrolment in specialised settings, either for a specific length of time or through the education process (EASNIE 2021).

In 2022/23, a total of 30,372 children under 6 years with disabilities attended a mainstream pre-primary class and only 157 an inclusion class. The number of children in the inclusion classes increases significantly according to the age of the children. The majority of ULIS-groups (94%) are located in publicly run *écoles maternelles* and schools.

Table 5

France: Number of children under 6 years (*premier degré*) with (special educational needs and) disabilities according to age and type of ECEC provision, 2022/23

	Regular class	Inclusion class
	Number of children	Number of children
2 and 3 year-olds	4,056	16
4 year-olds	10,270	64
5 year-olds	16,046	77
Total number of children	30,372	157

Source: RERS 2023, 81

Children with a migration background

In 2022, over 7.8% of the total population in France were of non-French origin of whom roughly two thirds (72%) came from countries outside the EU27. In the age group of the under-fives there were 9.7% children with a non-French citizenship, of whom a good 80% came from non-EU27 countries (Eurostat 2023c).

Children who are new arrivals to France are included in mainstream classes in *écoles maternelles* and schools. No special language tuition is provided for children with a background of migration but the pre-primary curriculum has a strong focus on language enhancement and development in general.

A 2014 study on access to *crèches* briefly mentions: “collective childcare facilities for young children seem to favour a mix of migratory origins”, although this criterion is not elaborated on. The children of mothers of non-French nationality who are not cared for at home are more likely to be enrolled in a *crèche* than those born to French parents. This is also the case for the children of immigrant mothers. This could also be due to a stronger desire on the part of the latter to use this type of structure. The migratory origin of the father seems to matter less, showing that the characteristics of the mother seem more decisive than those of the father for the granting of a place in a *crèche* (Le Bouteillec et al. 2014). Since schooling is compulsory from the age of 3, children with a migration background are obliged to attend an *école maternelle* (or be taught at home) from that age, as are all other children in France.

Parental leave arrangements⁵

Compulsory **Maternity leave** (*congé de maternité*) is fully paid for 16 weeks up to a monthly limit of €3,666. At least two weeks must be taken before the expected date of birth.

Paternity leave (*congé d'accueil à l'enfant*) is granted for 25 fully paid working days under the same conditions as maternity leave; these must be taken within the six months following the child's birth. Only 60% of fathers took paternity leave, although the figure is as high as 98% in the middle income brackets.

Parental leave (*congé parental*) can be taken up by both parents – also at the same time – up to the child's third birthday. A monthly allowance (*PreParE*) is paid of €422.21 if the parent is not working, €272.94 if working less than 50% and €157.45 if working 50 to 80%. A monthly income and working hours related tax-free allowance (*PreParE*) is paid. *PreParE* is paid up to a maximum of six months per parent of a single child following maternity leave, with two or more children it is paid until the child is 3 years old, for a maximum of 24 months. When taking Parental leave, parents may work for 16 to 32 hours per week. Parents can take part-time Parental leave simultaneously and receive benefit at the same time from the *PreParE*, but the total amount of payment cannot exceed €398,79.

There are no national statistical data about the uptake of parental leave. However, research studies suggest that in 2021 approximately 98-99% of those taking parental leave are mothers. 52% of recipients of *PreParE* did not work at all, 48% worked part time.

⁵ The brief summary in this section is based on the country note for France by Danielle Boyer and Jeanne Fagnini in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

Current challenges for the ECEC system in France

Country expert assessment by Sylvie Rayna

Challenges facing the ECEC system in France remain similar to those documented in the previous SEEPRO study (Rayna 2018). A central issue is the strong division between the care and education systems. It remains to be seen whether the new recent ‘light-touch’ attempts towards more continuity (e.g. through the initiatives and *classes passerelles*) will be further developed in the coming years.

Another continuing challenge is the absence of an early years specialisation in the initial professional education (IPE) of Pre-primary Teachers. There is currently no sign of a change to amend this. Some progress is being made regarding the IPE of the diverse practitioners in the care sector, but this still remains limited. There are no signs of introducing a specialist training for Early Childhood Coordinators.

Equality issues concerning access to care provision also remain significant as well as the ongoing privatisation tendencies (linked with less quality).

The discourse of ‘social investment’ in early childhood and ‘evidenced based’ rhetoric have penetrated recent policies of the *CNAF: Caisses nationales d’Allocations familiales*, linked to the aim of developing parental support, social cohesion, and the fight against poverty. Current debates are highlighting the tensions underlying such trends.

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 population in France totalled 67,871,925. This represents a steady rise over the past 20 years (2000: 60,545,022; 2010: 64,658,856; 2020: 67,320,216) (Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate of the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13) (Eurostat 2023d)⁶.

⁶ 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>).



Children under 6 years of age

Table 6

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

Age	Number of children
under 1 year-olds	696,229
1 year-olds	695,404
2 year-olds	715,241
3 year-olds	725,778
4 year-olds	743,186
5 year-olds	766,394
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	4,342,232

Source: Eurostat 2023a

In 2022, 3.1% of the total population were children under the age of 3, and 6.4% were children under 6 years of age. The share of young children in the total population has been significantly above the EU average for more than 20 years.

Table 7

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

Year	Comparison France/EU	Under 3 year- olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	France	3.7	3.7	7.4
	Ø EU15 ⁷	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	France	3.7	3.8	7.5
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	France	3.5	3.7	7.3
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	France	3.1	3.3	6.4
	Ø EU27	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, * own calculations, deviations due to roundings

Single households with children under age 6

In 2022, the greater majority of households in France (84.2%) with children under 6 years of age were couple households. Households headed by a single parent accounted for 6.9% of all households, the larger majority being single mother households (5.9%).

Table 8

France: Households with children under age 6, 2022

Household type	Total households	Total households, in %*
All households	6,246,400	
Couple households	5,260,300	84.2

⁷ 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.

Other household type	553,200	8.9
Single households, total	432,900	6.9
Single households, women	365,800	5.9
Single households, men	67,100	1.1

Source: Eurostat 2023i, *own calculation, slight deviations in the sums due to rounding

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In France, in 2022, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 76.6% and for women 70.6% (Eurostat 2023e).

In 2022, 68.4% of women and 88.9% of men (18-64 years) with children under 6 were employed. Among the 27 EU-countries (2020), the shares of employed fathers were slightly above the EU-average (87.2%) and those of mothers were more clearly above the EU-average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023h, own calculations).

Table 9a

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

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
France	65,0	88,3
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁸	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 %
France	68.4	88.9
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ⁹	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech. Rep.: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023h

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 9b*.

Table 9b

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)

⁸ 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

⁹ 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

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*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, 2023h

**[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>

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Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹⁰

In 2022, 28.3% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was significantly above 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 21% (EU: 21.6%). In 2020, 6.8% of children under 6 and 3.8% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023 f, g). Single parent families (41%) and families with three or more children (29.1%) were particularly affected (Eurochild 2021).

In 2021, a national training plan was launched as part of the national poverty strategy, which is primarily intended to improve the qualifications of ECEC professionals.

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¹⁰ ‘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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