

# THE NETHERLANDS

## Key contextual data

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# Contents

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC) .....3**
  - Historical milestones in ECEC in the Netherlands .....3
  - ECEC system type and auspices.....4
  - General objectives and legislative framework .....4
  - ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance .....5
  - Main types of provision .....5
  - Provider structures .....6
  - Participation rates in regulated ECEC settings .....6
  - Financing and costs for parents .....7
  - Staff to child ratios and group size .....8
  - Curricular frameworks .....9
  - Digital education.....9
  - Monitoring – evaluation .....10
  - Inclusion agenda .....11
    - Children with special educational needs and disabilities* ..... 11
    - Children with a migration background – children from Roma communities* ..... 11
  - Parental leave arrangements .....12
  - Current challenges for the ECEC system in the Netherlands (**Elly Singer**) .....12
  
- Demographic data.....14**
  - Total population .....14
  - Total fertility rate.....14
  - Children under age 6 .....15
  - Single households with children under age 6 .....15
  - Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age .....16
  - Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion .....17
  
- References.....17**



## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

### Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based provision are **childcare centre** (*kinderdagverblijf*, 0–3) and **kindergarten class** (*kleuterklas*, 4–5)<sup>1</sup>. Any additional forms are described where appropriate.

### Historical milestones in ECEC in the Netherlands

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1850                         | Increasing maternal employment leads to the establishment of the first institutions for the care of children from the age of 2½ years   |
| During the following decades | Childcare institutions are gradually followed by kindergartens based on the pedagogical approaches of Pestalozzi and Froebel – and later, Montessori                                      |
| 1950s and 1960s              | Childcare/nursery settings and playgroups are founded   |
| 1985                         | Kindergartens are integrated into the primary school system   |
| Up to 1986                   | Significant increase in the number of playgroups for 2- to 4-year olds  |
| 1990-1996                    | Expansion of childcare/nursery settings   |
| Since 1991                   | Decision to primarily provide for the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream settings   |
| 1996                         | First national assessment of quality of childcare   |
| 1998                         | First Chair in Childcare established at the University of Amsterdam   |
| 2002                         | Childcare settings for under 4-year olds come under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs  |
| 2005                         | The Childcare Act comes into force  |
| 2007                         | Childcare settings for disadvantaged under 4-year olds come under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education   |
| Since 2010                   | Both childcare centres and playgroups come under the same legislation.  |
| 2014                         | Inclusive Education Act comes into force.   |
| 2015                         | Municipalities are made responsible for disadvantaged and vulnerable children in the entire early education sector.   |
| 2018                         | Legislation on "Innovation and Quality of Childcare" and on "Harmonisation of Work in Childcare and Playgroups" comes into force.   |
| 2019                         | For disadvantaged children between 2½ and 4 years of age, attendance at a childcare centre is increased from 10 hours a week to 16 hours.   |
| 2022                         | New childcare funding system is planned (to be in force from 1 January 2025): The government will pay 96% of the maximum hourly rate for childcare directly to the childcare institutions |
| 2023                         | New law for multilingual day care: From 2024, childcare centres can provide child care in German, French or English for a maximum of 50% of the daily hours.                              |

Sources: Oberhuemer et al. 2010; Fukkink 2017, 2018; Slot 2018; Netherlands Youth Institute 2019; Eurydice 2023, 14.1

<sup>1</sup> **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 Netherlands, relevant formats are **0–3** and **4–5** years.

## ECEC system type and auspices<sup>2</sup>

The system of early childhood education and care in the Netherlands comprises two separate and partly overlapping sectors (childcare and early education) with different ministerial responsibilities.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (*Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid* – SZW) has overall responsibility for ECEC settings for under 4 year-olds, for out-of-school childcare provision for 4 to 13 year-olds, and for home-based childcare.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap* – OCW) is responsible for ECEC provision for children under 4 years of age who are at risk of language disadvantage and for the pre-primary education of 4 and 5 year-olds in primary school<sup>3</sup> (*Basisschool*).

Municipal authorities are responsible for the inspection and monitoring of ECEC settings for under 4 year-olds in term of compliance with legislation and regulations. The administration and management of schools is the responsibility of both the municipalities and the school inspectorate: While the municipalities are responsible for compliance with the law and for allocating budgets, the school supervisory authority is responsible for day-to-day operations (costs, curriculum, staff). This applies to both public and private schools.

## General objectives and legislative framework

The overarching goal of ECEC is primarily to ensure continuity of learning and support over time. The underpinning principle is that of lifelong learning, starting at an early age to enable individuals to realise their full potential and respond flexibly to change. In the case of children up to 6 years of age, particular attention is paid to reducing or preventing educational inequalities, particularly by providing support for language development. Further important goals are to support children in acquiring skills that will enable them to make a good start in primary school and to make it easier for parents to reconcile work and family commitments (Slot 2018).

In recent years a considerable transformation has been taking place in terms of the overall conceptualisation of ECEC in the Netherlands, and the sector has been experiencing dynamic changes which are still ongoing. As part of the implementation of the Dutch Childcare Act (*Wet Kinderopvang*, 2005 with amendments from 2020), all ECEC settings are required to work according to specific pre-defined general pedagogical objectives: to provide children with a safe and caring environment, to support the development of their personal and social competences and to transmit cultural norms and values; they are also required to establish a parents' board. In 2018, the Childcare Innovation and Quality Act (*Wet innovatie en kwaliteit kinderopvang*) and the Childcare and Playgroup Work Harmonisation Act (*Wet harmonisatie kinderopvang en peuterspeelzaalwerk*) entered into force. The main purpose of this legislation is to improve the quality and accessibility of childcare. The Childcare Act lays down provisions for various types of childcare for children over 6 weeks, especially with regard to special safety regulations. In addition, since 2010, childcare centres (*dagopvang in kinderdagverblijf*) and playgroups (*peuterspeelzaal*) for children under 4 years of age are covered by the same Education and Quality Act (*Wet ontwikkelingskansen door kwaliteit en educatie*, OKE). For playgroups, the Childcare and Quality Standards for Playgroups Act (*Wet kinderopvang en kwaliteitseisen peuterspeelzalen*,

<sup>2</sup> The Eurydice country report on ECEC in the Netherlands provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the references section.

<sup>3</sup> In the Netherlands, it has long been a tradition for 4 and 5 year-olds to attend kindergarten classes in the *Basisschool* before primary school officially starts at age 6.

WKO, 2010) also applies. In addition, the Decree on the basic requirements for quality pre-primary education (*Besluit basisvoorwaarden kwaliteit voorschoolse educatie*, 2010 with amendments from 2018) applies (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 36).

The Children and Young People's Act (*Jeugdwet* 2015) stipulates that since 2015 municipalities are responsible for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. One of the aims of this legislative reform was to create more transparency between different services and to reduce the number of these children (Netherlands Youth Institute 2023).

The Primary Education Act (*Wet op Primair Onderwijs*, 1998) applies to primary schools that admit 4 and 5 year-olds; it describes aspects concerning quality and funding modalities in addition to the relevant learning areas.

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

For children between 2½ and 4 years of age, municipalities are obliged to provide a place (at least 960 hours; approx. 16 hours/week) in a childcare centre if needed, especially for children from disadvantaged families. Attendance is voluntary.

Children from the age of 4 have a legal right to education, which in the Netherlands means a place in a kindergarten class (*kleuterklas*, ISCED 02) of the primary school (*basisschool*). Attendance is compulsory from the age of 5. There are no national regulations regarding the number of hours of this obligation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 50), although most children attend for 20 hours per week.

Primary school (ISCED 1) starts at the age of 6.

## Main types of provision

### Childcare sector

In the Netherlands, there are two main types of ECEC settings for children up to 4 years of age: **Childcare centres** (*kinderdagverblijf*) admit up to 185 children from 6 or 8 weeks to 4 years. This option is mainly used on a half-day basis by double income families, as a tax reduction is only granted if both parents work. With morning and afternoon shifts, they may be open for up to eleven hours a day and for 50 weeks a year.

**Playgroups** (*peuterspeelzalen*) are primarily attended by children with socially disadvantaged backgrounds or children with impending disabilities or developmental delays aged 2½ to 4 years. The children are supported with special educational programmes (*voorschoolse educatie*) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 185). In most cases, the playgroups are only open half days. Since 2019, the number of weekly attendance hours has been increased from 10 to 16.

Children from 6 weeks of age can also be cared for through regulated **home-based childcare services** (*gastouderopvang*). While in 2018, 18% of the under 4 year-olds were enrolled (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 34), in 2023 this share had decreased to 13% (SZW 2024)

In 2018, there were 4,654 ECEC centres altogether, all privately owned (Eurydice 2023).

### Education sector

4 and 5 year-olds usually attend a **kindergarten class** (*kleuterklas*) at the *basisschool* – often in the two months before they turn 4. The groups for 4 year-olds must be open for at least 2.5

hours on four half days. The exact daily opening hours are decided by the schools or the providers. They are usually closed on Wednesday afternoons. The official school year runs from 1 October to 30 September.

## Provider structures

As a rule, **childcare centres** and **playgroups** that offer educational programmes for disadvantaged children or children with special educational needs are publicly funded.

However, most of the facilities for under 4 year-olds are privately run and have to compete in a competitive market (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 63) though there is a means-tested public funding for working parents.

In 2022/23, of the **kindergarten classes** at 6,582 primary schools attended by most children over the age of 4, only 30.6% were publicly run. Church sponsors (roughly equally divided between Catholic and Protestant sponsors) accounted for 58.9% of primary schools but are also publicly funded, only 10.5% were run by other private sponsors (CBS 2023a).

According to Eurostat data, 69.9% of children from 3 years up to the first class of primary schools attended public institutions in 2021, 30.1% were in private-commercial settings (Eurostat 2023e). This share likely includes those 3- and 4 year-old children who are enrolled in settings of the private care sector for under 4 year-olds.

## Participation rates in regulated ECEC settings

According to Eurostat data, the share of children under 3 years of age enrolled in ECEC settings increased significantly from 2005 to 2022: from 40% to almost three quarters (72.3%). The share of children from 3 years to school entry also increased, but to a lesser extent: from 89% to 95.8%. On average, under 3 year-olds in the Netherlands spend less than 17 hours per week in an ECEC setting, compared to 21 to 22 for children over 3 years of age (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 68).

Table 1

**Netherlands: Enrolment rates in ECEC centre-based settings according to age and duration of attendance, 2005-2022**

| Year | Weekly hours of attendance | Under 3 year-olds, in % | 3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in % |
|------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 2005 | 1 to 29 hours              | 36                      | 82   |
|      | Over 30 hours              | 4                       | 7  |
|      | No enrolment in ECEC       | 60                      | 11   |
| 2010 | 1 to 29 hours              | 44                      | 76   |
|      | Over 30 hours              | 6                       | 15   |
|      | No enrolment in ECEC       | 50                      | 9  |
| 2015 | 1 to 29 hours              | 41.1                    | 77.5   |
|      | Over 30 hours              | 5.3                     | 13.2   |
|      | No enrolment in ECEC       | 53.7                    | 9.3  |
| 2022 | 1 to 29 hours              | 61.3                    | 66.5   |
|      | Over 30 hours              | 11.0                    | 29.3   |
|      | No enrolment in ECEC       | 27.7                    | 4.2  |

Source: Eurostat 2023b, Slight deviations from 100% due to rounding

According to quarterly ministry (SZW) reports (SZW 2024), 67% of under 4 year-olds are enrolled in a centre-based setting, 13% in a home-based setting, but no age-disaggregated data exist.

According to Statista (2023), 72.3% of children under 3 years of age attended a childcare centre for at least one hour a week in 2022. Children in home-based care usually spend 1½ days per week there (SZW 2024). Among the 4 and 5 year-olds, almost all attended a kindergarten class at primary school in 2021 (see *Table 2*), usually for 22 hours per week.

*Table 2*

**Netherlands: Number of children and enrolment rates in school-based ECEC settings by age, 2021**

| Age         | Number of children | Enrolment rates, in % |
|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 3 year-olds | 146,586            | 84.9                  |
| 4 year-olds | 167,207            | 95.0                  |
| 5 year-olds | 173,311            | 98.8                  |

Source: Eurostat 2023f, k

## Financing and costs for parents

In 2019, a total of 0.73% of the gross domestic product was spent on the early education sector (0.4% for the under-threes age group and 0.3% for the 3 to under 6 age group (OECD 2023). The entire education sector accounted for 5.4% of gross domestic product in 2022 (CBS 2023b).

**Childcare centres**, which are mainly attended by children with language delays, or the municipalities as providers, decide how the state funds are used.

After the introduction of the Dutch Childcare Act in 2005, the funding of the ECEC sector, especially childcare centres, changed from a supply-based to a demand-based funding system. Private facilities are not subsidised by the government. However, parents whose child attends a private facility or is cared for in day care receive tax relief on the cost of childcare. Between 2005 and 2008, parents paid only half of the childcare costs; an increase in costs and budget cuts, especially from 2012 onwards, resulted in a lower attendance rate. Since 2016, the situation has stabilised, but the parents of most children in ECEC settings tend to come from middle- and higher-income groups (Slot 2018).

After the introduction of the Childcare Act, the compensation scheme for parents was extended so that their own contribution decreased. However, as the take-up of childcare increased sharply at the same time, the state costs also increased. Therefore, in 2007, the employer's contribution was made compulsory. This contribution is stable and amounts to 0.5% of the employee's salary (as of 2020) (Berenschot 2022, 69).

Furthermore, in 2022, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment planned, jointly with four executive bodies – the Education Executive Agency, the Tax Administration/Benefits, the Employee Insurance Agency and the Social Insurance Bank – a new financing system to come into effect in 2025: Under the new system, the state will cover 96% of childcare costs, which will be transferred directly to the childcare institutions. So parents will no longer be at risk of having to repay part of their childcare allowance (Eurydice 2022/2023).

Fees for childcare facilities for under 4 year-olds are among the highest in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 11). In 2021, the maximum cost for one hour of childcare was €8.46 (Berenschot 2022, 68). Parents can apply for an income-related childcare allowance (*kinderopvangtoeslag*) to reduce the cost of childcare. Conditions for receiving such an allowance include: both parents are working or studying, they have a contract with a registered institution, they pay part of the childcare costs themselves. For disadvantaged children, fees can be





reduced according to a certain indicator system. This takes into account, among other things, the educational level of the parents or the country of origin (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 61).

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 19% of net household income on childcare costs<sup>4</sup> (OECD.Stat 2023).

**Primary schools** are financed through municipal budgets provided by the government. They receive lump-sum subsidies from the municipalities to cover their staff and operating costs. Additional basic subsidies are provided for equipment and maintenance of the buildings. Since 2012, the schools have received additional funds for special activities such as language learning, the teaching of scientific or technological subjects or for staff professional development. Financial resources for children with special educational needs have no longer been reserved for individual children since 2014, but are distributed to the institutions concerned via a regional pool.

Enrolment in a kindergarten class at school is free of charge for parents. However, they often donate money to the school, which is mostly used for excursions or cultural activities. Schools may also be supported by sponsors.

Private schools can receive state subsidies if they adhere to certain legal requirements such as the number of children per group.

### Staff to child ratios and group size

The maximum group size in childcare centres and playgroups for children from 0 to 4 years is 16. For children with special educational needs/language development difficulties, at least two professionals must be present (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2014). Since the beginning of 2018, babies up to one year of age are cared for by at least two childcare workers who remain consistent.

Table 3

**Netherlands: Staff to child ratio in childcare centres and playgroups by age, 2022**

|               | Max. number of children per core practitioner |
|---------------|---|
| 0 to 1 year   | 3 (per 2 core practitioners)                  |
| 1 to 2 years  | 5   |
| 2 to 3 years  | 6   |
| 3 to 4 years  | 8   |
| 4 to 7 years  | 10  |
| 4 to 13 years | 11  |

Source: Eurydice 2023, 4.2

For **primary schools**, there are no regulations regarding the minimum or maximum number of children per group, but there are regulations regarding the size of the building in relation to the total number of children (usually 3.5 sqm per child). As a rule, primary schools consist of eight grades, of which grades 1 to 4 cover the age range between 4 and 8 years. Schools decide on their own groupings. In most, the children are organised in same-age groups, but there are also schools with mixed-age groups or with groups based on the children's abilities.

<sup>4</sup> 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.





In support institutions, there are less children in a group, and they may also be mixed-age groups – depending on the developmental stage of the children.

## Curricular frameworks

### *Childcare sector*

There is no prescribed national curriculum for work in ECEC settings for under 4 year-olds. However, providers of these facilities are obliged to ensure that each setting creates its own educational programme. In cooperation with the parents' council, a strategy is drawn up with regard to the children's development and learning opportunities. Important components of this are the professionals' interactions with the children, their care, the age distribution in groups, the teaching of rules and values, as well as opportunities for play and outdoor activities. Play is considered the predominant method for learning.

Particularly in special needs settings, a variety of different early childhood education programmes (*voorschoolse educatie*, VVE) are used to promote specific areas of development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 185). Children are expected to participate in these programmes at least four half days a week. Some are applied nationally, others only locally. Such programmes must meet strict criteria to be approved by the Accreditation Commission for Intervention Programmes (*Erkenningscommissie Interventies*) or the Panel for Welfare and Development Stimulation (*Panel Welzijn en Ontwikkelingsstimulering*). Currently, five programmes are nationally approved: *Piramide*, *Kaleidoscoop*, *Startblokken/Basisontwikkeling*, *KO Totaal* and *Sporen* (Eurydice 2023, 4.3). All these programmes focus on four core areas: language (Dutch as a second language), mathematics, motor and socio-emotional development (Slot 2018).

### *Education sector*

According to the Primary Education Act, primary schools must cover the following areas of learning – including kindergarten classes for 4 year-olds: (1) sensory coordination and physical activity; (2) Dutch language; (3) arithmetic and mathematics; (4) English; (5) electives such as geography, history, religion; (6) expression; (7) self-confidence and (8) healthy living. The number of hours in each area is not specified, only the total number of hours of 7,520 in the eight primary school years. Teaching and learning methods and materials can be chosen by the schools themselves. The government has set certain targets to be achieved by the end of the primary school years. The National Institute for Curriculum Development (*Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling*) has been commissioned by the Ministry of Education to develop further learning objectives with more detailed content and activities. According to the government's wish, more time should be set aside in schools for science and technology.

## Digital education

The use of digital media is not regulated by law, neither in primary schools nor in childcare centres. However, in 2018, 98% of the schools had a computer for every 3.5 pupils and 99% of the teachers used digital learning materials in the classroom. In addition, digital media are used by teachers for planning or evaluation. Professionals can get support from expert centres such as *Kennisnet*.

## Monitoring – evaluation

### *Child-related assessment*

Children under 4 years of age in childcare centres are evaluated by professionals through observations and checklists. As a rule, different areas of development are assessed three times a year. This information is also shared with other professionals, discussed with parents and summarised and passed on to the primary school. Since 2018, tests are no longer used in this age group.

For disadvantaged children under 4, education programmes place particular emphasis on a good transition to the kindergarten class at school, but do not specify exact measures (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 112).

In the education sector, children's progress is also recorded three times a year. Parents are invited to discuss children's progress and achievements. In some schools, grades are used, in others written assessments.

### *Centre-level internal assessment*

Childcare centres are required to regularly assess their quality through self-evaluation to ensure that they meet all quality standards. These include parental participation, the quality of the programmes offered, the knowledge and skills of the professionals, the learning environment, the responsiveness to individual needs, including the use of an observation system. Parents are involved in the self-evaluation through the parent' council/board (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 131).

The Dutch Consortium for Childcare (*Nederlands Consortium Kinderopvang Onderzoek*, NCKO) has developed a so-called 'quality monitor' (*Kwaliteitsmonitor*) as an example of a self-evaluation tool that allows childcare centres to better assess their quality, strengths and weaknesses (NCKO 2018).

Primary schools decide themselves on their standards and on the methods used. Since 1998, schools have been obliged to draw up a school plan, which is updated every four years and describes the planned steps for quality improvement. Based on this plan, a brochure is produced annually to inform parents and pupils. These two documents and the general results of the self-evaluation are the basis for inspection visits by the Education Inspectorate.

### *Externe Evaluation*

Quality criteria for **childcare settings** for under 4 year-olds are laid down in the Childcare Innovation and Quality Act (2018). Municipalities must ensure that the facilities comply with the requirements of the Childcare Act (2004 with amendments from 2020), which has been delegated to the Municipal Health Services (*Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst*, GGD). In their annual inspections, a pedagogical practice observation tool is used, which was developed in cooperation with the Netherlands Youth Institute. If it is decided that improvements are needed, the Education Inspectorate conducts a follow-up inspection (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 124ff). Two frameworks exist for the inspection of childcare facilities: one is more concerned with an overview of the quality of full-day settings in the Netherlands, the other with inspections of facilities whose quality needs to be improved. The annual results of the evaluations by the Municipal Health Service are included in the Inspectorate's report on the general state of education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 133).

External evaluations in **primary schools** are carried out by the Education Inspectorate (*Inspectie van het Onderwijs*), a partially independent authority under the Ministry of Education. The Education Inspection Act contains the legal criteria, the respective quality objectives are set by the

schools themselves – and are evaluated in the same way. The Inspectorate conducts a full inspection of the schools every four years and prepares a report. Among other things, the quality of teaching is assessed on the basis of the relevant laws or quality improvements. A framework (2012) serves as a guideline for schools and school inspectorates, setting out the methods to be used, the criteria to be reviewed and the standards that schools must meet. The Education Inspectorate checks whether schools comply with the relevant laws and also focuses on the quality of teaching.

## Inclusion agenda

Childcare centres and primary schools in the Netherlands are responsible for creating a suitable learning environment for every child. Particularly since the Act on Inclusive Education (*Passend Onderwijs* 2014) came into force, inclusion has been an important issue. Inclusion is understood as the consideration of diverse and multiple needs, such as having a disability, a different linguistic background, being a member of a minority group or other culture. This “super-diversity” needs to be taken into account in childcare and school settings (Fukkink 2018).

In 2020, the Dutch government allocated 7 million euros to provide children with special educational needs with the support they need (European Commission 2020, 141).

### *Children with special educational needs and disabilities*

For **childcare centres**, the quality standards of support programmes are laid down in the Education and Quality Act (*Wet ontwikkelingskansen door kwaliteit en educatie*, 2010). Especially children from socially disadvantaged families have the opportunity to experience a range of cultural and social activities. Municipalities decide on the implementation of various projects and programmes (e.g. *Piramide*, *Kaleidoscoop*). According to the Youth Act (*Jeugdwet*, 2015), children and young people and their parents also receive support from municipalities in dealing with developmental delays and other problems. In addition, there are various measures for parents of children under 3, such as reduced fees (European Commission 2020, 27f).

In order to identify children with special educational needs as early as possible and to initiate attendance at a mainstream institution, childcare centres cooperate with health services (European Commission 2020, 86, 107).

In the **education** sector, since 1991, children with disabilities or special educational needs are to be integrated as much as possible into mainstream institutions ('Going to school together'). Since 2014, schools have had to ensure that such children receive the support they need. They receive special financial subsidies for this, based on the individual child. Parents can register their disabled child at any school and it is the school's responsibility to ensure the appropriate support is provided.

The Act on Centres of Expertise in Special Needs Education (*Wet op de Expertise centra*, 1998) refers to four types of special schools: (1) for visually impaired children; (2) for hearing impaired children and children with communication difficulties; (3) for physically and/or intellectually disabled children; and (4) for children with mental or behavioural disorders.

### *Children with a migration background – Children from Roma communities*

The *TOY for inclusion* project has tried to facilitate access to early education for children with a migrant background or from Roma communities, mainly through meeting centres. For newly arrived children in the Netherlands, activities are offered either in the respective accommodation or in ECEC settings (European Commission 2020, 92, 125).

So-called bridge classes in primary schools provide children with language difficulties intensive support in small groups (full or half day or as an extended school day).

In 2022, 7.1% of the total population had a non-Dutch citizenship, roughly half of which (51.8%) came from other EU27 countries. The distribution among under 5 year-olds is very similar (7.1%, 50%) (Eurostat 2023c).

## Parental leave arrangements<sup>5</sup>

Compulsory **Maternity leave** (*zwangerschapsen bevallingsverlof*) lasts 16 weeks, of which up to six can be taken before the birth. At least four weeks before the birth and six weeks afterwards are compulsory. The period of maternity leave is fully paid up to a maximum of €256.54 per day or 70% of the “daily maximum wage”.

Since 2020, there has been fully paid **Childbirth leave for fathers and partners** (*geboorteverlof*), the length of which corresponds to the number of hours they work per week (e.g. 38 hours = one week's leave). Furthermore, there is an additional time off (*Aanvullend geboorteverlof*), which is equal to five times the weekly working hours (maximum five weeks). The first week is fully paid, with no upper limit; the additional time is paid at a maximum of €256.54 per day. The first week must be taken within four weeks after the birth, the additional time can also be taken within six months after the birth.

Unpaid **Parental leave** (*ouderschapsverlof*) lasts 26 times as long as the number of weekly working hours of each parent. This individual, non-transferable entitlement can be taken until the child is 8 years old. At 38 weekly hours, for example, this is 988 hours, i.e. approx. 26 weeks. Parental leave is an Both parents can also take parental leave at the same time. Since the Flexible Working Time Act (2016), parents can apply for a change in their working hours or, if necessary, also work from home. From August 2022, the first nine weeks will be paid at 70% of daily earnings (maximum €256.54), if taken within the first year of the child's life.

In 2021, 90% of fathers took the Childbirth leave directly after birth – almost all for four days at least. One third of the fathers took five or more weeks.

In 2021, 18% of mothers took an average of 9 hours/week for 14 months, compared to 17% of fathers who took an average of 11 hours a week for 13 months. It was also found that it is mainly better educated mothers and fathers who take parental leave.

## Current challenges for the ECEC system in the Netherlands

### *Country expert assessment by Elly Singer†*

Developing a clear and unified political vision on the care and education of young children is a major challenge for the ECEC system in the Netherlands. Who is responsible for what: the government, parents and/or private companies? And how do we want to balance (unpaid) caring activities and paid employment between males, females and professionals in the Netherlands?

There is a growing consensus about the importance of early childhood education. Ideally, this would be organised as a unified system with regulations for settings for 0 to 5 year-olds that would guarantee good quality provision for all children. Stakeholders of early childhood care and education in the Netherlands – local and national authorities, the primary school system, services for care and education, parent organisations, and experts all agree on this. However,

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<sup>5</sup> The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for the Netherlands by Laura den Dulk and Mara A. Yerkes in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).



the current situation does not provide effective links between the child care system and the education sector. This creates problems for parents who need care for their children while working outside the home and for the child's education.

### 1. Challenges for working parents because of the remains of the mother-at-home policy.

- a. Until recently, the Netherlands had relatively short maternity and parental leaves. The mother was entitled to a maximum of 10 weeks of paid maternity leave and the father to 5 days. This has now improved slightly. Since 2020, paternity leave is on average granted for 5 weeks (at 70% of previous pay); since 2021, fully paid maternity leave is granted for 16 weeks; and since August 2022, paid parental leave (at 70% of previous wage) has been extended to 9 weeks, although this is only for salaried employees, not for self-employed workers (Rijksoverheid 2022). However, these arrangements make full-time work after birth difficult. In addition, low-income parents cannot get by on 70% of their salaries.
- b. School hours are often not geared to the needs of working parents. Many schools have a lunch break during which childcare must be arranged; they close at 15:00 (young children) or 15:30 (older children); and on Wednesday afternoons schools are also closed; childcare has to be arranged during school holidays (Berenschot 2022). Parents with several children may have to deal with differences in school hours. Childcare is faced with the task of filling 'the gaps' in school hours. This causes problems, especially in out-of-school care, to find staff who accept these fragmented and short working hours. This lack of coherent childcare and school times causes a lot of stress for parents and can have a negative impact on the quality of family upbringing.

### 2. Challenges because childcare is a privatised sector.

- a. In line with neoliberal government policy, the Dutch government chose – through the 2005 Childcare Act – not to be directly responsible for childcare facilities. Childcare must be provided by private companies and parents are responsible for the choice of provision and payment. In theory, the parents would be responsible for the quality: after all, they opt for a certain kind of provision. In practice, however, parents appear to pay particular attention to accessibility, costs and opening times, and not to pedagogical quality (Thijssen, Voorn and Gijssbers 2019). Government supervises the companies via the local inspection of youth health care and the national inspection of education. The government prefers minimal interference with the pedagogical content in the child care sector. Hence there is no national pedagogical curriculum and no strong national institute to stimulate pedagogical discussions and innovations.
- b. Dutch parents are required to pay for the costs of child care. Part of the costs are covered by childcare benefit. The amount of childcare benefit is calculated as a percentage of the hourly rate of the childcare provider ranging from 33.3 to 96.0% depending on the parents' collective income and the number of children. This system has recently resulted in one of the biggest scandals in the history of the Dutch government: the so-called Dutch childcare benefits scandal (*kinderopvangtoeslagaffaire* – Belastingdienst 2023; Trouw 2022). Between 2013 and 2020, authorities wrongly accused over 26,000 parents of making fraudulent benefit claims, requiring them to pay back the allowances they had received in their entirety. In many cases, this sum amounted to tens of thousands of euros, driving families into severe financial hardship and severe stress in the family, related to evictions, divorces and child care placements by child protection services. Moreover, the procedure of the Tax and Customs Administration turned out to be "discriminatory" and filled with "institutional bias" against migrant parents, parents of Islamic faith, parents of colour. The (financial) problems of parents caused by the authorities have still (2022) not been solved.

c. There are serious plans to make the Dutch childcare system free of charge, also for non-working parents. That would prevent another childcare benefits scandal. But there are political obstacles. Free childcare for all children will increase the demand, and there are already large waiting lists due to a shortage of staff. Moreover, childcare is privatised, 15% of the childcare sector is owned by investment companies; they can set the price. A lot of public money would then go to private for profit companies. Moreover, wealthy parents will take the benefit and can use it to buy more expensive childcare for their child.

### 3. The challenge of working on quality and of the balance between the responsibility of parents, employers and government.

In the Netherlands, like in any other country, there is an abundance of pedagogical potential; many parents and professionals are passionately involved in early childhood education and care. There are many examples of excellence. There are also initiatives at the local and the national level for cooperation between schools and the childcare organisations. The current challenge for the early education and care system in the Netherlands is to coordinate these initiatives, to promote cooperation between practitioners, academics, managers and social politicians, and to mobilise the pedagogical potential in discussions and constructive dialogues. Both Dutch politicians and the broader public have to be convinced that the main purpose of the sector is care and education to support parents in combining work and care for children. Early childhood education should be focused on the well-being of young children and their parents – and also the well-being of the pedagogues, who deserve respect and salaries that are comparable with other sectors in education and social welfare.

## 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 the Netherlands was 17,590,672. For about 20 years the population has been increasing continuously (2000: 15,863,950; 2010: 16,574,989; 2020: 17,407,585) (Eurostat 2023a).

### Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27 (as of 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate among the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.62, the fertility rate in the Netherlands was above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> 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 age 6

Table 4

**Netherlands: Number of children under age 6 in the population, 2022**

| Age                                 | Number of children |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Under 1 year                        | 179,133            |
| 1 year-olds                         | 169,323            |
| 2 year-olds                         | 171,226            |
| 3 year-olds                         | 171,415            |
| 4 year-olds                         | 173,556            |
| 5 year-olds                         | 176,741            |
| <b>Total 0 to under 6 year-olds</b> | <b>1,041,394</b>   |

Source: Eurostat 2023a

In 2022, 3.0% of the total population were children under 3 years of age, 5.8% were children under 6 years. These proportions were slightly above the respective EU27 (2020) average. With one exception, the shares of children under 3 years of age as well as of children aged 3 to 6 years were above the EU averages at the reporting dates 2000, 2005 and 2015, in some cases considerably so.

Table 5

**Netherlands: Share of children under 6 years compared with the EU averages, 2000 to 2022, in %\***

| Year | Comparison Netherlands/EU | Under 3 year-olds | 3 to under 6 year-olds | 0 to under 6 year-olds |
|------|---------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 2000 | Netherlands               | 3.8               | 4.1                    | 7.9                    |
|      | Ø EU15 <sup>7</sup>       | 3.2               | 3.2                    | 6.4                    |
| 2005 | Netherlands               | 3.5               | 3.8                    | 7.3                    |
|      | Ø EU25                    | 3.1               | 3.1                    | 6.2                    |
| 2015 | Netherlands               | 3.3               | 3.4                    | 6.7                    |
|      | Ø EU28                    | 3.0               | 3.2                    | 6.2                    |
| 2022 | Netherlands               | 3.0               | 3.0                    | 5.8                    |
|      | Ø EU27(2020)              | 2.7               | 2.9                    | 5.7                    |

Source: Eurostat 2023a, \*own calculations, slight deviations due to rounding

## Single households with children under age 6

In 2022, the majority (91%) of all households with children under 6 were couple households. Households with single parents accounted for 4.1% – almost exclusively single mothers (3.4%).

Table 6

**Netherlands: Households with children under age 6, 2022**

| Household type    | Total households | Share of all households, in %* |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Total households  | 1,479,000        |                                |
| Couple households | 1,346,000        | 91.0                           |

<sup>7</sup> 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.



| Household type            | Total households | Share of all households, in %* |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Other types of households | 72,700           | 4.9                            |
| Total single households   | 60,200           | 4.1                            |
| Single households, women  | 51,000           | 3.4                            |
| Single households, men    | 9,300            | 0.6                            |

Source: Eurostat 2023l, \*Own calculations

## Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In 2022, the overall employment rate in the Netherlands for men (15-64 years) was 88.3% and for women 81.8% (Eurostat 2023j).

In 2022, 81.3% of women and 94.9% of men with children under 6 were employed. Both shares were thus in third place among the 27 (2020)-EU-countries (EU-average mothers: 63.6%, average fathers: 87.2%) (Eurostat 2023g own calculations).

Table 7a

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

|   | 2010                 |                   |
|---|----------------------|-------------------|
|   | Mothers, in %        | Fathers, in %     |
| <b>Netherlands</b>  | 76.6                 | 93.7              |
| Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries <sup>8</sup>        | 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 %     |
| <b>Netherlands</b>  | 81.3                 | 94.9              |
| Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries <sup>9</sup> | Luxembourg: 81.9     | Sweden: 95.1      |
| Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries               | Czech Republic: 42.5 | Romania: 78.5     |

Source: Eurostat 2023g, own calculations

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 7b*.

Table 7b

### 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<br>61.1 (2023)     | 83.5<br>84.2 (2023) |
| +Ukraine (2021)           | n.d.                                | n.d.         | 60.7                    | 69.9                |

<sup>8</sup> 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

<sup>9</sup> 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 %      |
| +++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 2023g, 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>

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## Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>10</sup>

In 2022, 13.6% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which was lower than the EU27 average (23.3%). The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 16.5%, compared to the European average of 21.6%. 1.4% of the under 6 year-olds and also 1.5% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation in 2020 (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023h, i).

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<sup>10</sup> '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](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation))

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