

# SWITZERLAND

## Key contextual data

*Compiled by*

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## Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Switzerland is a federal state with four language regions: German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic. German is the official language in 17 of the 26 cantons (mainly in north-west, east and central Switzerland) and there are additional official languages in four other cantons. French is the official language in four cantons (mainly in the west, i.e. Romandie), and in two others it is spoken in addition to other languages. Italian is an official language in Ticino and Graubünden, and Rhaeto-Romanic is an official language only in Graubünden (Infos Schweiz 2015).

### Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based ECEC provision are **childcare centre** (*Kindertagesstätte; crèche; nido dell'infanzia, 0–3*) and **pre-primary class** (*Kindergarten/Vorschule/Eingangsstufe; école enfantine/cycle 1; scuola dell'infanzia, 4–5*)<sup>1</sup>. Any additional forms are described where appropriate.

### Historical milestones in ECEC in Switzerland

1817	First custodial institution for young children established in German-speaking St. Gallen during the peak of widespread famine in Europe; five more are subsequently opened in Geneva and the canton of Bern.
1826	First childcare institution established in Geneva for working parents, based on the English infant school model
1830	The first infant school for poor children opened in Zurich.
1844	The first <i>scuola dell'infanzia</i> is established in Ticino based on Italian models.
1845	In German-speaking Switzerland, the first Froebel-inspired kindergarten opens in Riesbach near Zürich.
1848	In French-speaking Switzerland, <i>écoles enfantines</i> are included in the School Act.
1st half of 19th century	Infant schools and kindergartens develop as mass institutions, with up to 150 children (3 to 5 year-olds) being supervised by one person. In 1844 there were 127 such settings.
2nd half of 19th century	The first private facilities ( <i>crèches</i> , school-age care) are established.
1870	First <i>crèche</i> is founded in Basel as a service for working-class families in which both parents have to work; the focus is on hygiene and care rather than educational activities.
1873	The first training institute for kindergarten pedagogues is opened in St. Gallen, offering a one-year professional education course.
1874	Compulsory primary education is introduced, but handled very differently depending on the canton.
1881	The Swiss Kindergarten Association is founded, through which the kindergarten pedagogues receive their diploma. The Association recommends extending the course of professional education to two years.
1907	The Swiss <i>Crèche</i> Association is founded, promoting the expansion of <i>crèches</i> /nurseries, especially in German-speaking Switzerland. Among the staff are paediatric nurses and nuns; the training is extremely varied and is not regulated. Attempts to standardise the training of staff remained unsuccessful until well into the 20th century.

<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 Switzerland, the relevant formats are **0–3** and **4–5** years.



1942	The Kindergarten Association publishes a comprehensive set of criteria for professional education/training.
Pre-1960s	The traditional role of women sees them as home-makers and caring for children as their responsibility, which is why both the employment rates of women and the number of children to be cared for are declining. If children have to be cared for, this is mainly done by grandmothers.
1961	In Geneva, the <i>École de Jardinières d'Enfants</i> is founded for the training of staff working in crèches/nurseries.
1967	The Kindergarten Association publishes a framework curriculum for work in kindergartens, which is based on the primary school curriculum.
Post 1960/ 1970s	New kinds of facilities spring up, mainly to provide care for children with a migration background. Women's associations organise different approaches towards extra-familial care; these include new ideas about pedagogy and go beyond the mere supervision of children.
1972	The Crèche Association issues regulations for a two-year apprenticeship as an early childhood educator and opens its own vocational training school.
1973	Family day care associations are founded.
1970s and 1980s	All-day schools are established, enabling comprehensive services for school-age children. Crèches (now often referred to as "Kita") increasingly employ pedagogically trained staff.
1982	The kindergarten framework curriculum is revised and expanded.
1990-2000	Kindergartens come under the responsibility of the 26 cantons. Some cantons pass legislation regarding the funding of nurseries.
2003	A parliamentary initiative pushed through a kick-off financing family-supplementary care. New childcare places (crèches, day care, supplementary school care) are funded by law; by 2018, the law supports the creation of 57,400 new childcare places.
2007	Despite the expansion, there is still a lack of childcare options outside the family. According to a survey of parents, around 20% of children of pre-school and school age cannot be cared for to the desired extent.
2022/23	A parliamentary initiative calls for the transformation of the kick-off funding into permanent funding. In March 2023, the National Council approved. The Council of States still has to approve the matter.

Sources: Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz 2012; Geschichte der sozialen Sicherheit in der Schweiz 2019; Geiss and Westberg 2020

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

In Switzerland, the ECEC system is divided into a childcare sector for children under 4 years of age and an education sector for 4 to 6 year-olds consisting of pre-primary provision in schools.

The cantons and municipalities are responsible for childcare facilities, in most cases under the cantonal departments for family and social policy. The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Social Affairs (SODK) has a co-ordinating role between cantons on related issues.

The education system is decentralised, in line with the federal structures in Switzerland. The main responsibility for education lies with the 26 cantons, each of which has its own legal provisions. The cantonal department for education manages, coordinates and supervises the education system in the respective canton. The Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK) is responsible for coordination across cantons in education-related issues (EDK 2021a).

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

## General objectives and legislative framework

### *Childcare sector*

In a joint declaration of the SODK and EDK on early childhood education and care (Childcare network 2018), it was stipulated that childcare provision should above all be needs-based, accessible and affordable and, in principle, open to all children. The two ministerial conferences intend to co-operate further in developing the quality of services and facilitating transitions between provision. The legal framework for the childcare sector for children under 4 years of age is provided by the Federal Law on Financial Aid for Extra-Familial Childcare (Fedlex 2021a) and the Ordinance on the Admission of Foster Children (PAVO) (Fedlex 2021b).

### *Education sector*

In pre-primary settings, besides Christian, humanistic and democratic values, basic principles are promoting equal opportunities, gender equity and mutual respect (Curriculum 21). Under the Federal Constitution (1999, Art. 62 - Fedlex 2021c), the cantons are obliged to coordinate the education system. Through inter-cantonal agreements (2009), the Swiss school concordat Har-moS (Educa 2021) regulates the structures and goals of compulsory schooling, which also includes the pre-primary level for 4 to 6 year-olds. The EDK ensures the enactment of the concordat, supports the cantons in its implementation and reviews the educational goals achieved (EDK 2021a).

## ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Attendance at early childhood settings for children under 4 is voluntary. There is no legal entitlement to a place for under 4 year-olds - except in the canton of Basel-Stadt (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 52, 200).

For over 4 year-olds, attendance in pre-primary classes is usually, but not always, compulsory. The exact age at which children may enrol is determined by the cantons. In most cases, they are between 4 and 5 years old when they start pre-primary provision. Parents have a say regarding the age of entry if there are special reasons.

In some German-speaking cantons, attendance is not compulsory or is only compulsory for one year. Since 2015/16, the canton of Ticino has offered an additional optional year in addition to the two compulsory preschool years, meaning that 3 year-olds can also attend.

Primary school (grade 1) begins when the children are between 6 and 7 years old.

## Main types of provision

### *Childcare sector*

#### **Childcare centres** (*Kindertagesstätten, Kitas, Krippen / crèches / nidi dell'infanzia*)

For children from 3 months to 4 years of age, full-day or half-day ECEC centres are available and supervised by the respective canton.

#### **Home-based settings** (*Tagesfamilien / accueils familial de jour / famiglie diurne*)

In addition to centre-based settings, home-based childcare provision is also available, both for young children and for school-age children. In 2021, 5.6% of children under the age of 4 were cared for in home-based settings, 4.2% by nannies, au-pairs and babysitters (BFS 2023i).

There are few national statistical data available on the number of children attending centre-based settings for children under 4 years, or on the number of settings.

In Switzerland, **grandparents** are a widely used **informal** form of childcare. In 2021, 36.1% of children under 4 years of age were cared for by grandparents, compared with 34.3% attending centre-based settings and 10.3% by persons from the neighbourhood/extended family (excluding grandparents) (BFS 2023i).

Most centre-based settings are open 11 to 12 hours a day, usually from 7:00 to 18:00/19:00.

### Education sector

**Pre-primary classes** (*Vorschulen, Kindergärten, erster Lernzyklus / écoles enfantines, cycle 1 / scuola dell'infanzia*)

Pre-primary classes for 4 to 6 year-olds are attached to primary schools. In some cantons, *cycle 1* is combined with the first two grades of primary school. In this organisational form, known as *Grundstufe / Basisstufe* in German-speaking areas or *cycle primaire 1* in the French-speaking regions, 4- to 7/8 year-olds are taught together (Eurydice 2023).

Table 1

Switzerland: Number of pre-primary units and children in pre-primary classes, 2005 – 2022

	Pre-primary units 4 to 6 year-olds	Number of children in pre-primary classes*
2010/11	4,994	148,879
2015/16	5,457	170,576
2021/22	5,436	181,158

Sources: BFS 2023a, \*BFS 2023f

### Provider structures

In both the childcare and education sectors, there are public and private ECEC settings, or facilities that employers set up for their employees.

In 2021/22, the majority of **pre-primary units** (4 to 6 year-olds) were public (92.6% or 5,034). Just 7.2% (391) were private, non-subsidised facilities and only 11 (0.2%) were both private and subsidised.

Table 2

Switzerland: Number of pre-primary units according to provider type, 2021/22

Setting	Provider			Total
	Public	Private		
		Non-subsidised	subsidised	
Pre-primary units	5,034	391	11	5,436

Source: BFS 2023a

In 2015, 90% of **childcare centres** for children under 4 were privately organised as associations, limited liability companies, foundations, or company ECEC centres, with two-thirds of the associations operating one to three centres (Childcare network 2015, 5)<sup>3</sup>. No recent statements can

<sup>3</sup> The Childcare Network was dissolved in 2020 and is continued by Alliance Enfance: <https://www.alliance-enfance.ch/>

be made on the relationship between public and private services, as this information is often missing at cantonal level (Stern, von Dach, Fries, and Iten 2021).

In 2022, there were a total of 340 childcare centres (156 providers) for children under 4 years of age in Zurich, of which 312 were private with a contract (91.8%), 18 without a contract and only 10 were municipal. They offered 12,185 places in total (City of Zurich 2023, 4). Whether this ratio can also be observed in other parts of Switzerland cannot be statistically proven.

## Participation rates in regulated provision

At the federal level, no consistent country-wide statistics are compiled on the number of childcare places or their usage. Also, not all cantons keep such statistics. In the national statistics database, data for under 4 year-olds are collected only for some aspects relating to childcare provision. In the education sector, data for 4 to 6 year-olds are generally subsumed under the wider age-group of 4 to 12 year-olds in primary education. Children between 4 years of age and the start of primary school are not listed separately.

National statistics report for 2021 that three-quarters (75.2%) of under-3s used *some kind of* extra-familial care for up to 29 hours per week, with 23% being cared for more than 30 hours; the shares of 4 to 12 year-olds were 89.7% and 9.1% respectively (BFS 2023j).

However, according to Eurostat data on Switzerland, which focus on *centre-based* settings, a quarter of children under 3 years of age attended a childcare setting for up to 29 hours per week in 2021, while over two thirds did not attend a facility at all, as did over one-third of the over-3s (Table 3).

A recent analysis of attendance rates in 1,890 centre-based settings receiving start-up funding revealed the extent to which childcare for under 4 year-olds in Switzerland primarily takes place in the family: 21% of children attended on only one day per week, 35% on two days, 22% on three days, 10% on four days and only 12% on five days per week, i.e. full time (EDI 2020, 7). National statistics show that approximately 40% of all children up to three years attended centre-based childcare in 2018, with most children attending two or three days per week (Faeh and Vogt 2021, 15).

Also, in 2021, 37.3% of children between 3 years of age and first grade of primary school (pre-primary class/kindergarten) did not attend a centre-based setting whereas half of them attended an institution for more than 30 hours per week. An OECD source based on 2020 data indicates that 50% of 3 to 5 year-olds were enrolled in ECEC programmes and pre-primary education in Switzerland, compared to 87% on average across OECD countries (OECD.Stat 2023a).

Table 3

**Switzerland: Enrolment rates according to age and duration of attendance in centre-based settings, 2010 to 2021**

Year	Weekly attendance	0 to 2 years, in %	3 years up to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2010	1 to 29 hours	21.4	62.0
	Over 30 hours	4.6	9.9
	No enrolment in ECEC	74.0	28.0
2014	1 to 29 hours	24.0	56.9
	Over 30 hours	5.8	9.1
	No enrolment in ECEC	70.2	34.0
2017	1 to 29 hours	19.6	40.3
	Over 30 hours	6.0	12.6



Year	Weekly attendance	0 to 2 years, in %	3 years up to minimum compulsory school age, in %
	No enrolment in ECEC	74.4	47.1
2021	1 to 29 hours	25.1	50.1
	Over 30 hours	5.4	12.6
	No enrolment in ECEC	69.6	37.3

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

Eurostat data according to age groups are only available for children over 3 years of age: These show that only very few 3 year-olds attended an institution in 2021, just under half of the 4 year-olds, but almost all 5 year-olds (see *Table 4*).

Table 4

#### Switzerland: Number and enrolment rates of children in kindergartens/pre-primary classes by age, 2021

Age	Number of children in pre-primary classes	Enrolment rates in pre-primary classes, in %
3 year-olds	2,144	2.3
4 year-olds	41,400	48.7
5 year-olds	84,115	97.5
6 year-olds	45,097	53.2

Source: Eurostat 2023h, i

## Financing and costs for parents

According to OECD data, total public expenditure on early childhood education and care amounted to 0.49% of GDP in 2019 (OECD 2023).

### Childcare sector

Fees for **childcare centres** are generally more expensive for parents than in other countries, as childcare provision is less heavily subsidised by public funds. On average, parental contributions cover about two-thirds of the total cost of a childcare place (Kibesuisse 2021).

For low-income families the canton of Bern, for example, provides childcare vouchers which cover almost all of the childcare costs. If the child has a disability, the parents additionally receive a lump sum. Parents with higher incomes who wish to continue working can also apply for vouchers, but at a lower level (European Commission 2020, 52).

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 32% of net household income on childcare costs which was the highest among the OECD-countries<sup>4</sup> (OECD.Stat 2023b).

### Education sector

Attendance at **pre-primary classes** is free of charge. 95% of pupils attend compulsory school in the public school in their residential area, which is free of charge for all children. Approximately 5% of children attend a private school for which a fee is charged.

Responsibility for compulsory schooling lies with the cantons, which are obliged by the Federal Constitution to harmonise important goals and structures nationwide. The municipalities organise school operation, which allows for adapted local solutions (EDK 2020).

<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.



## Staff to child ratios and group size

### Childcare sector

Regulations on staff to child ratios and on the minimum of fully trained personnel in childcare centres are set by the cantons (Faeh and Vogt 2021, 42) and there are great variations. On average, the minimum requirement for the proportion of trained personnel is 50%, ranging from 100% in the canton of Jura and 33% in the canton of Ticino. Staff to child requirements for working with 0 to 1½ year-olds range from 1:3 to 1:5. In most German-speaking cantons the requirement for work with 1½ to 4 year-olds is 1:6. The French- and Italian-speaking cantons tend to differentiate more specifically according to age. For 4 to 6 year-olds in supplementary childcare the ratio in most cantons is 1:8, although in Jura (with 100% professionals) it is 1:15 (data based on table adapted from Ecoplan (2020, 30-31) by Faeh and Vogt (2021, 42-44)).

According to the recommendations of the SODK and EDK (2022), one professional cares for two to three children up to the age of 18 months, and four to six children from 18 months until they enter kindergarten, ten to 12 children at the age of 4–8 years and 12 to 14 children at the age of 8-12 years. According to Kibesuisse (2020) mixed-age groups generally comprises ten to 12 children, whereby children under 18 months are weighted with a factor of 1.5, and children with special needs with a factor greater than 1 (depending on the kind of care required). No more than six children up to 18 months should be present at the same time.

Kibesuisse (2020) recommends the following (purely by calculation) staff-child-ratios for professionals with different qualifications (see table 5), with at least one pedagogically trained specialist for every 12 children.

Table 5

Switzerland: Recommended staff to child ratios by age of children and staff qualification

Age	Care specialist ( <i>Fachperson Betreuung, Fachrichtung Kinderbetreuung, FaBeK</i> )	Educator ( <i>Kindernerzieher:in, HF</i> )	Student or assistant
	Concurrent number of children per staff		
Up to 1½ years	3	3.9	2.1
1½ - 3 years	5	6.5	3.5
3 – 4½ years	8	10.4	5.6
4½ – 6 years	10	13	7
6 years and over	12	15.6	8.4

Source: Kibesuisse 2020, 11

### Education sector

The organisation of pre-primary classes is the responsibility of the cantons. As a rule, 4 and 5 year-olds are together in one class; the minimum and maximum number of children in a class is set by the cantons - usually between 22 and 24 children. However, group size varies greatly between cantons (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 88).

According to the recommendations of Kibesuisse (2019, 17), one pedagogically trained specialist and one assistant should be present for every 15 children in a pre-primary class.

The daily organisation of time is arranged by the municipalities or the schools themselves. For example, in "comprehensive block teaching" lessons are combined for at least three and a half hours on five mornings. The weekly number of hours is usually between 12 and 25 hours in the first year, and 20 to 25 hours in the second year.

In 2021, there were on average 18.6 children in a pre-primary class (BFS 2023b), and in 2021/22, one full-time equivalent professional was responsible for 17.8 children (BFS 2023c).

## Curricular frameworks

### *Childcare sector*

In Switzerland, there is no legally binding curricular framework for pedagogical work in settings for under 4 year-olds (Faeh and Vogt 2021, 39). However, a non-mandatory Orientation Framework for Early Childhood Education, Care and Upbringing in Switzerland, authored by C. Wustmann Seiler and H. Simoni, is available (Swiss UNESCO Commission and Childcare Network Switzerland 2016). It is relevant in the three language regions, i.e. German-speaking Switzerland, Ticino and French-speaking Switzerland. The document is used as a reference framework by cantons and municipalities, who may require a centre-based pedagogical concept as a basic prerequisite for accreditation.

Six guiding principles form the basis of the Orientation Framework:

1. Physical and psychological well-being (protection and security, needs- and age-appropriate support, reliable adults)
2. Communication (different ways of expression as a condition for making themselves understood by others)
3. Belonging and participation (being heard and being able to contribute)
4. Resilience and empowerment (acquiring a positive self-concept and self-esteem)
5. Inclusion and acceptance of diversity (appreciative recognition for all children)
6. A holistic approach and appropriateness (learning through the senses, stimulated by interests and experience).

In order to do justice to these guiding principles, professionals need to regularly observe, reflect on and document educational and developmental processes. By creating a stimulating learning environment geared to the individual interests of the children, they can moderate educational processes. The framework also emphasises the joint responsibility of educators and parents in supporting the child, e.g. during transitions.

### *Education sector*

After the intercantonal agreement on the harmonisation of compulsory education came into force in 2009 (Educa 2021), teaching materials were created for the different language regions, new curricula were developed and national educational goals were set according to which all children should receive a basic education (languages, mathematics and natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, music, art and design as well as movement and health).

The pre-primary classes in the French-speaking cantons follow the "*Plan d'études romand*" since 2015, and in the Italian-speaking Ticino the "*Piano di Studio*" since 2018/19. All 21 cantons where German is spoken have adopted curricula based on the "*Lehrplan 21*". The curriculum is compulsory (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 200).

Compared to teaching in primary school, lessons in Cycle 1 are less oriented towards subjects or modules, but are strongly oriented towards the heterogeneous development of the children and are organised in an interdisciplinary way. Nine development-oriented approaches facilitate this planning:

1. Body, health and motor skills (e.g. development of motor skills, expressing feelings with the body)
2. Perception (e.g. practising close observation, focusing attention)

3. Temporal orientation (e.g. reflecting on daily structures, learning concepts of time)
4. Spatial orientation (e.g. exploring the living space, describing spaces)
5. Connections and regularities (e.g. learning everyday concepts, differentiating the world view)
6. Imagination and creativity (e.g. trying out different forms of representation, developing new solutions)
7. Learning and reflection (e.g. thinking about activities and goals, comparing new with known)
8. Language and communication (e.g. creating a variety of opportunities to speak, expanding vocabulary)
9. Independence and social action (e.g. developing confidence in one's own abilities, accepting responsibility).

Play and learning are seen as two sides of a coin in terms of exploring and extending personal competences. Learning materials build on perceived interests and stimulate curiosity for new things.

## Digital education

### *Childcare sector*

There is no reference to digital awareness or digital education in the Orientation Framework for Early Childhood Education, Care and Upbringing in Switzerland.

### *Education sector*

In the curriculum for the first learning cycle in the German-speaking regions (Lehrplan 21 2016a, b) the module *Media and information technology* specifies a range of competences for 4 and 5 year-olds. These include: laying the foundations for reflecting with and about media, the interactive use of media, also the analysis of simple problems and the understanding of information processing systems. Both analogue and digital media open up a creative possibilities and playful experimentation. However, the curriculum also states that the use of media should not be in competition with real experiences in one's own environment, but should complement them.

## Monitoring – evaluation

In both the childcare and education sectors, internal evaluation is usually mandatory and must be carried out regularly (every one to three years). This may be in the form of a development plan, an annual report or an updated pedagogical programme - although the focus may be different depending on the canton.

### *Childcare sector*

In the childcare sector, there are relatively few requirements beyond the obligation to register and obtain authorisation and supervision, for which each canton is responsible. However, the federal-level 'ordinance on the admission of foster children' (PAVO) stipulates that monitoring visits should take place at least every two years (Faeh and Vogt 2021, 23). In recent years, quality issues have come more clearly into focus, especially with regard to structural and process quality; assessments of learning processes are also considered important (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 125f). According to the Orientation Framework for ECEC in Switzerland authored by Wustmann Sailer and Simoni in 2016 (see section on *Curricular frameworks*),

the written pedagogical programme of all childcare facilities should contain statements on ensuring the pedagogical quality of the facility, to be assessed through self-evaluation and external evaluation procedures. In the canton of Solothurn, for example, in addition to the Orientation Framework for ECEC in Switzerland (Swiss UNESCO Commission and Childcare Network Switzerland 2016), evaluators are required to adhere to the quality standards of the QualiKita association (QualiKita 2021), which also provides instructions for online self-evaluation.

### *Education sector*

Due to the federalism in Switzerland, different regulations at the canton and school level apply in terms of quality assurance. Both external and internal evaluation procedures are partly compulsory, partly voluntary. However, external evaluators must always adhere to the respective cantonal guidelines.

In German-speaking Switzerland, quality is usually ensured through a combination of external evaluation, internal quality management and school supervision. In the French-speaking part of the country, performance tests are more common, both for the children and for the quality management of the institution. Overall, the presence of national educational goals and common regional language curricula have helped to standardise quality efforts in recent years.

Furthermore, since 2006, the EDK and the Confederation have been operating the "Swiss Education Monitoring" as a way of systematically collecting data on the quality of education (EDK 2021b). Since 2010, the Swiss Coordination Centre for Education Research (SKBF) has presented the "Swiss Education Report" every four years, which contains data on all levels of education (but does not refer to the childcare sector) (skbf/csre 2023).

Many cantons have included quality assurance and development in their school and education laws in the context of the harmonisation of compulsory education (Educa 2021, see also section on *Curricular frameworks*).

The integration of pre-primary classes into compulsory school has facilitated the transition to primary school. To ensure continuity between the levels, information about the children is passed between the professionals. As a rule, however, no grades are given in the pre-primary units. Instead, the children's abilities are recorded on observation sheets, which serve primarily to promote the development of each individual child. In some cantons, parents are also involved in the evaluation of facilities for children over 4 years of age (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 130).

## **Inclusion agenda**

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

With the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1997, Switzerland committed itself to taking into account the special support needs of children with disabilities. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force in Switzerland in 2014, strives for the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of life and is a guiding principle for the inclusive orientation of all support services.

#### *– Childcare sector*

Since 2008, the cantons have been responsible for special educational measures for children and young people. In an "Inter-cantonal agreement on cooperation in the field of special needs

education" (*Sonderpädagogik Konkordat*) the EDK stated that childcare facilities (*Tagesstrukturen*) are part of the basic special needs education provision and that integrative solutions are to be preferred to an approach of separation.

With the KitaPlus programme, an initiative of the Kifa Switzerland Foundation and the *kibesuisse* Childcare Association Switzerland, specific conditions are created in regular institutions for children with special needs and disabilities so that they can be integrated into normal everyday life (KitaPlus 2021).

According to field experts and organisations, a comprehensive inclusive orientation is still a long way off. Support is needed from local authorities to implement the legal provisions, among other things to enhance networking between all those involved, and to ensure that specially trained educators are available for supporting the staff in childcare centres.

#### – *Education sector*

Due to the very different conditions in the cantons, inclusive developments in education can hardly be described from a national level perspective.

In the canton of Bern, for example, children with disabilities can attend either a special school or a regular kindergarten. For inclusive education, a psychological/psychiatric clarification and decision-making process is required, as well as a permit that has to be renewed every year. The regular institution helps to decide whether the child is accepted - the prerequisite is always that appropriate educational resources are available (Achermann et al. 2017).

#### *Children with a migration background*

In general, Swiss integration policy understands integration as a two-way process in which both the indigenous and the migrant population should participate. It is a core task of the state, in which all levels participate and which is oriented towards the principle of "promote and challenge" (State Secretariat for Migration 2020).

In 2022, 25.7% of the total population had a non-Swiss citizenship; almost two-thirds of them (64%) came from EU27(2020) countries. Among children under 5 years of age, the figures were 27.7% and 60.4% respectively (Eurostat 2023c).

#### – *Childcare sector*

In 2018, the EDK and the cantons agreed on five goals for the integration of refugees and temporarily admitted persons (Integration Agenda Switzerland). One of these goals states that 80% of children under the age of 4 from asylum-seeking families should be able to communicate in the language spoken in their place of residence when they start compulsory schooling (KIP 2021).

One example of promoting literacy, especially among children from home learning environments with low stimulation and with a migrant background, is a project called "Tell me a story". It is aimed at 2 to 5 year-olds and their families and involves, among other things, reading stories aloud in the languages of origin (European Commission 2020, 129).

#### – *Education sector*

Special support is also provided for children with a migration background via the Special Education Concordat (EDK 2007).



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

**Maternity leave** (*Mutterschutz, congé et allocation de maternité*) lasts 14 weeks after the birth of the child, of which eight weeks are compulsory; leave before the birth can only be taken for medical reasons. For 14 weeks, 80% of earnings are paid, up to a maximum of 220 CHF (€225.48) per day, if contributions were paid into an old-age insurance scheme during the nine months before the birth. In most cases, mothers take more than the 14 weeks provided for, even if this extra time is not remunerated.

**Paternity leave** (*congé et allocation de paternité*), first introduced in 2021, lasts two weeks, and is paid in the same way as Maternity leave. It begins after the birth of the child and must be taken within six months; it can be taken in full or on a daily basis.

There is no legal basis for **Parental leave**. A few private companies grant unpaid leave (from a few days to 24 months)

In 2021, the average number of Maternity leave days taken by recipients was 79 (out of 98). On average, CHF 130 (€133.24) was paid, well below the upper limit. Initial analyses show that in 2021, about 70% of eligible fathers received childcare allowance and took an average of 14 days off.

## Current challenges for the ECEC system in Switzerland

*Country expert assessment by Janine Hostettler Schärer*

### From expansion to quality issues

Until recently, the main focus in Switzerland was on increasing the provision in the early education and care system, as demand still exceeds supply. This has been politically supported since 2003 with start-up funding for supplementary family childcare. In recent years, however, there has been a paradigm shift from *care* to *education*, from structural to pedagogical quality. Every child has a right to high-quality early education, which should lead to inclusion and more equal opportunities for all children. However, this quality must also be financed. Since 2022, there has been a political push to move from start-up funding to continuous funding for supplementary family childcare in order to strive for quality improvement. National standards are needed to promote process quality (Faeh and Vogt 2021). Concepts and internal quality development processes are needed for their implementation and review. Active learning support for children, more dialogue between professionals and children, and coaching of professionals (Reyhing et al. 2019) are indispensable prerequisites for this.

### Shortage of staff and skilled workers

Another challenge is the shortage of staff and professionals in Switzerland. This is exacerbated by the current shortage of primary school teachers, as professionals from the early childhood sector are migrating to the better-paid school sector. In order to retain staff in the ECEC field, better remuneration and better working conditions are needed. For example, paid continuing professional development courses are needed, as well as remunerated leave entitlements and paid time for preparation and follow-up, meetings and supervision.

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<sup>5</sup> The brief overview in this section is based mainly on the country note for Latvia by Isabel Valarino and Rahel Aina Nedi in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

## Career opportunities

Efforts are underway in German-speaking Switzerland to create more training places for HF Childhood Pedagogues (see also Hostettler Schärer 2024). This is important in order to offer career opportunities to ECEC staff so that they can be retained in the profession. Above all, however, this should increase the pedagogical quality in the facilities.

## 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 Switzerland totalled 8,738,791. This is a further indication of a steady increase over the past 20 years (2000: 7,164,444; 2010: 7,785,806; 2020: 8,606,033 (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). At 1.52, Switzerland is in line with the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)<sup>6</sup>.

### Children under 6 years of age

Table 6

Switzerland: Number of under 6 year-olds according to age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Up to 1 year	88,200
1 year-olds	85,795
2 year-olds	86,922
3 year-olds	88,825
4 year-olds	88,828
5 year-olds	90,261
<b>Total 0 to under 6 year-olds</b>	<b>528,831</b>

Source: Eurostat 2023a

The proportion of children under 3 years of age in the total population was 3.0% in 2022, and that of children under 6 years of age was 6.1%. These shares were slightly above the EU27 average.

<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>).



Table 7

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

Year	Comparison Switzerland / EU	Up to 3 years	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Switzerland	3.3	3.4	6.7
	Ø EU15 <sup>7</sup>	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Switzerland	2.9	3.0	6.0
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Switzerland	3.0	3.0	6.1
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Switzerland	3.0	3.1	6.1
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, \* Own calculations; deviations due to roundings

### Single households with children under 6 years of age

86% of households with children under the age of 18 were couple households in 2021. Households with single parents accounted for 14%. Information on households with younger children was not available.

Table 8

Switzerland: Households with children under 18 years of age, 2021

Household type	Number	Share of total households, in %*
Households – total	867,522	
Couple households	746,454	86
Single households, total	121,068	14

Source: BSF 2023h, \* Own calculations.

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

In Switzerland in 2023, the employment rate of men (15 to 64 years) was 83.5% overall, that of women 61.1% (Eurostat 2023k).

In 2022, 46.9% of women and 95.3% of men with children under 6 were in employment (BFS 2023g). The rate of employed fathers was thus above the EU27(2020) average (87.2%) and that of mothers significantly below (average: 63.6%) (Eurostat 2023e).

Table 9a

Switzerland: Employment rates of parents with children below age 6 compared with seepro3 countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
Switzerland	36.8	98.6
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries <sup>8</sup>	Denmark: 82.7	Switzerland: 98.6
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 32.7	Latvia: 74.8

<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.

<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



	2022	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
Switzerland	46.9	95.3
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU(2020) countries <sup>9</sup>	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU(2020) countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Sources: BFS 2023g; Eurostat 2023e

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022 – like Switzerland – 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
<sup>+</sup> 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, 2023k

\*\*Rosstat. 2022. *Statistical annex SDG in Russia 2022*. <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/sdg/report/document/70355>;

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<sup>+</sup>[SSSU] State Statistics Service of Ukraine. 2022. *Employed population in 2021, by age group, sex and place of residence*. <https://ukrstat.gov.ua/operativ/operativ2017/rp/eans/eanse/Archznmve.htm>

<sup>++</sup>Statista. 2023. *Employment rate in the United Kingdom from June 1971 to January 2023, by gender*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280120/employment-rate-in-the-uk-by-gender/>

<sup>+++</sup>Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Families and the labour market, UK: 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>

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

In 2021, 23.3% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was in line with the EU27 average (23.5%) for this age group. The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 17.6% (EU: 21.7%). In 2020, 2.8% of children under 6 and 1.8% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023f, g).

<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

<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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