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Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance

Report¹

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Rapporteur: Ms Françoise HETTO-GAASCH, Luxembourg, Group of the European People's Party

Summary

The arrival of a baby is a joyous event, but it can also be disconcerting and complex. Parents must strike a balance between work and private life at a time when their child's brain and body are going through the most spectacular growth. Too often they do not have enough time to devote to their children because of the demands of their work and the inadequacies of child-care services. Many inequalities are established from the very youngest age. The social and economic cost if parents do not pay enough attention to their children can be very high. It is during childhood that the fundamental bases securing the enjoyment of human rights are established. Widespread investment in family policies and early childhood is key to the construction of balanced personalities and to the development of stable and prosperous societies.

The Covid-19 crisis has served as a reminder of the central role the enlarged family plays in children's upbringing. Our children must feel loved, safe, and secure, and grow up harmoniously to become responsible members of society. The Assembly must remain vigilant and ensure that the standards which the Council of Europe defends are applied. Upholding the best interests of the child must continue to guide us in the ongoing improvement of public policies to ensure a work-life balance.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 14946](#), Reference 4471 of 30 September 2019.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. The arrival of a baby is a joyous event, but it can also be disconcerting and complex. Parents must strike a balance between work and private life at a time when their child's brain and body are going through the most spectacular growth. Too often they do not have enough time to devote to their children because of the demands of their work and the inadequacies of child-care services. Many inequalities are established from the very youngest age. The social and economic cost if parents do not pay enough attention to their children can be very high. The Parliamentary Assembly is convinced that it is during childhood that the fundamental bases securing the enjoyment of human rights are established. Widespread investment in family policies and early childhood is key to the construction of balanced personalities and to the development of stable and prosperous societies.

2. The States Parties to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognise the right of every child to a standard of living that is adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. Under Article 27 of the Convention, the parents or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure the conditions of living necessary for the child's development. The States Parties undertake to take appropriate measures to help these persons carry out this task and provide material assistance and support programmes in case of need. Article 17 of the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) requires the States Parties to provide the necessary protection for the development of children, particularly the most vulnerable, such as girls, migrants, children from ethnic minorities or those born to poor, single-parent or sexual minority families.

3. The Assembly believes that the best interests of the child must be regarded as one of the ultimate goals of the Council of Europe in all circumstances. On many occasions it has fought uncompromisingly for its preservation. In [Resolution 2056 \(2015\)](#) "The inclusion of children's rights in national constitutions as an essential component of effective national child policies", it called for constitutional guarantees to be provided for the protection and promotion of children's rights based on a modern approach addressing children as autonomous rights-holders, ensuring that the best interests of the child are a primary consideration (Article 3 of the CRC).

4. The Assembly notes that the Council of Europe member States must meet the requirements of an economic recovery while bearing in mind the socio-economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Assembly is alarmed that the balance between parents' professional and private lives may be undermined in this context. This balance is all the more important in times of crisis when children need even more support and protection. Depriving them of their parents' attention would be an infringement of their right to development and would impair our societies' future.

5. Bearing in mind these considerations and in order to meet the needs of children and their families properly, the Assembly urges the member States of the Council of Europe to take the following measures:

5.1. ensure that employment policies take account of parental responsibilities for all parents (including fathers); promote flexible working conditions; extend the length of parental leave for all parents (including fathers) and create the necessary conditions for parents taking parental leave not to be disadvantaged or discriminated against at work or on the labour market; provide for the possibility for parents bringing children up on their own to take both the mother's and the father's parental leave combined;

5.2. take into account the difficulties of single-parent families, most of whom are women; and recognise the role of members of the extended family through the creation of special leave for grandparents still at work and for any responsible adult in the family, subject to the prior consent of the parent;

5.3. in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic ensure that working conditions enable persons responsible for children to provide care for children and support remote learning without being penalised; and secure a healthy lifestyle for children, such as healthy food and physical exercise; view such arrangements as means of preventing mental disorders, burn-out and domestic violence;

5.4. enhance mental health services for children and parents in order to combat childhood mental disorders and perinatal depression effectively; improve services for protection against domestic violence, services for parents with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities, and services for families in situations or at threat of extreme hardship; ensure that the most vulnerable children are given special support without stigmatising their environment or their living conditions;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 28 September 2021.

5.5. adopt a national strategy for early childhood so as to ensure that childcare services can continue to function while catering for the best interests of the child in consultation with local and regional authorities; uphold the quality of care provided in these facilities through dignified working conditions, measures to prevent high staff turnover and appropriate training; and establish a legal right to child care;

5.6. extend the use of free training in parenting strategies to help adults cope with their children at birth and support them in their development; set up guidance on parenting issues; and improve diagnosis and supervision of perinatal depression without stigmatisation;

5.7. take account of the risks that can be posed by the use of screens, not just for children but above all for the sake of harmony within families; launch campaigns not only to combat child addiction to screens but also to help adults in the entourage of such children; and provide the necessary help for parents who are victims of addiction to screens, acting in the best interests of the child and pursuing a positive education plan;

5.8. assess and monitor family policies permanently, covering the national early childhood strategy, so as to help with the ongoing improvement of these policies and review them at regular intervals; allocate sufficient funds for university research on these subjects; and take account of the views of families and children, including those in vulnerable situations, while securing respect for child protection and personal data protection.

6. Bearing in mind its role, working by the member States' side, the Assembly once again calls on the European Union to open negotiations, as soon as possible, on accession to the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), in order to enhance the consistence of the European standards with regard to socio-economic rights.

B. Draft recommendation³

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to Resolution ... (2021) "Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance". The best interests of the child must be regarded as one of the ultimate goals of the Council of Europe so that we can provide every child with a good start in life. We know that "it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."
2. Striking a better balance between work and private life without impairing the child's best interest is a challenge for the authorities. It is also a social, economic, political and demographic need. This new ambition requires the co-operation of the national authorities, the local and regional authorities, parents and professionals. It means that we must strike at the root of child poverty and exclusion and meet parents' needs while mustering the necessary resources for children's harmonious development.
3. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 17 of the European Social Charter (ETS No. 35) require States Parties to provide the necessary protection for children's development, particularly the most vulnerable children, such as girls, migrants and children from ethnic minorities or born to poor, single-parent or sexual minority families.
4. The Assembly is convinced that the Council of Europe can help to set up inclusive early childhood family policies meeting needs expressed by parents while catering for the best interests of the child. It supports the current work to prepare a new strategy for the rights of the child for 2022-2027 and invites the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) to incorporate early childhood and policies for the first 1 000 days into its activities.
5. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
 - 5.1. incorporate issues linked to the policy for the first 1 000 days into the next strategy for the rights of the child and its ground-breaking work on the roots of poverty; and
 - 5.2. help the member States to prepare national strategies on early childhood, promote good practices and foster exchanges of information between the authorities running these national strategies.
6. Bearing in mind its role, working by the member States' side, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to advocate for negotiations to be opened as soon as possible for the European Union to accede to the revised European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), the aim being to enhance the consistency of European standards with regard to socio-economic rights.

3. Draft recommendation adopted by the committee on 28 September 2021.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Françoise Hetto-Gaasch, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. For many parents, the arrival of a baby and the first two years can be a bumpy ride. From the moment of conception, a period of upheaval and potential begins for the new parents. They must reorganise their lives, redefine their priorities and adjust the balance between their private and professional lives. These profound changes must not be made against the child's best interests, which must be protected unconditionally and in keeping with the rights enshrined in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the parents' responsibility. A responsibility they share with the public authorities. Most of our countries have sought to develop careful policies to achieve this balance. We must do more and invest massively for the good of our communities.

2. The complexity of family policies is undeniable given the variety of situations. Over the years, many of our member States have managed to introduce generous measures which provide services of a very high standard. Beyond their immediate results, the State expects them to shape well-balanced, responsible citizens. The success of family policies depends on the joint efforts of the various stakeholders involved in children's development. In order to make a success of this, we parliamentarians need to shape the vision behind the reform and clarify the roles of all concerned: professionals, parents and public authorities.

3. The Council of Europe defends the rights of the children and supports their inclusion in the society. It helps to strengthen public policies in line with international law. Through the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and the case law of the European Court, it watches over them. Under the authority of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), the Children's Rights Division helps to develop expertise in the best interests of our children. And the European Revised Social Charter (ETS No. 163) provides additional protection, including against all forms of negligence.

4. In July 2019, I tabled with a group of parliamentarians a motion for a resolution entitled "Best interests of the child and policies to ensure a work-life balance". The motion was referred to the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development for report on 30 September 2019 and I was appointed rapporteur on 2 October 2019. The aim, from the perspective of the best interests of the child, was to review policies on parental leave, flexible working hours and place of work, special working arrangements, unpaid leave for family reasons, childcare arrangements and so on. The advances made in these areas should be seen in the light of international and European standards that guarantee children equal opportunities, a decent standard of living and social, legal and economic protection. In particular, they must meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable children, including migrant children, and protect them from discrimination based on gender and disability.

5. The Covid-19 crisis has served as a reminder of the central role the family plays in children's upbringing. Our children must feel loved, safe and secure, and grow up harmoniously to become responsible members of society. I therefore call on the Parliamentary Assembly to remain vigilant and to ensure that the standards which the Council of Europe defends are applied. Upholding the best interests of the child must continue to guide us in the ongoing improvement of public policies to ensure a work-life balance.

2. Developments in family policy: successes and shortcomings

6. In response to shifts in European societies, family policies have undergone profound upheavals through wide-reaching and fast-paced reforms that have reaped slow but considerable rewards. For example, although the principle of legal equality between spouses was established in national laws at a relatively early stage, it has only recently gained traction in practice. Parental leave for spouses on the birth of a child has also been introduced, even if it is not always applied evenly across all the social classes and professions. A helping hand from the authorities to make it more attractive should encourage better sharing of household tasks between the parents. These policies have helped to change the way society considers women. The father's role has also changed and grown.⁴ Effective equality between the parents is progressing and the whole community is adapting. For a long time, such policies were primarily geared towards boosting national birth rates, but their scope has now widened.

4. This was the central idea of my previous report and [Resolution 2079 \(2015\)](#) "Equality and shared parental responsibility: the role of fathers."

7. As society develops, businesses have replaced families in creating wealth. Policies have expanded to include efforts to reconcile the interests of the parents with those of business by facilitating professional activity while supporting the development of family units through financial and non-financial benefits and tax reductions. This progress in reconciling work and private life should be welcomed. In this connection, it should be noted that the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023 underlines the social significance of maternity and paternity leave and requires that the role of both parents in children's upbringing be taken into consideration to ensure that both women's and men's human rights are fully and equally respected.⁵

8. We must continue with these changes. Our countries have taken on specific commitments with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4 calls on the authorities to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"⁶ Everyone must have access to the services provided for the very young, particularly those who are most vulnerable and fragile in any way.

9. Family policies must encourage the emancipation of women and the sharing of responsibility by fathers in keeping with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."⁷ Attention should also be given to the valuable role played by all those who look after young children within the extended family. This could include leave for grandparents who look after their grandchildren when they are unwell, for example.

10. Universal access to childcare not only benefits parents but also gives work to childcare professionals. Research has shown that children can feel neglected in certain circumstances. Quebec assessed its childcare policy for the very young in 1997. Significant increases in stress were measured in children from 2 to 4 years of age. The stress did not disappear as they grew older. In some cases, it grew worse. The dilemma of balancing the parents' needs with those of their children must be given consideration.⁸ We must do everything in our power to develop win-win policies.

11. Far too many children still do not get to spend enough time with their parents. Some parents actually delegate their roles through choice or obligation, and for various reasons the work-life balance continues to tip towards the professional career. A study by Ohio State University⁹ found that although 20% of parents benefit from flexible working times, a large number have no such arrangements. Not all women and men have access to flexible working arrangements. Until recently, the right to work from home was above all granted to those in the highest positions and mainly to women.¹⁰ In the United Kingdom, nearly a third of women felt penalised on returning to work after maternity leave. Many women are obliged to set aside their careers in order to look after their children. Our professional lives are increasingly encroaching on our home lives and as politicians, we have allowed this situation to become the new normal.

12. Despite the reforms that have taken place, society seems to systematically prioritise work over family life, particularly for men. For many children, evenings and weekends are no different from weekdays as their parents are working. Parents should be given the option of working fewer hours per week (for example France's "time savings account" system that allows employees to take time off in lieu) so that they can choose whether to play a greater role in caring for their children during early childhood or later on. The lockdown period certainly brought many families closer together, obliged as they were to organise their days around one another. It would be interesting to learn from successful experiences and advocate these through appropriate policies. At the same time, we have witnessed an increase in conflicts within the family, mental health problems and domestic violence. Lessons must be learnt in order to cushion the impact of future crises.

13. In spite of the considerable amounts of public money mobilised, policy on early childhood remains ill-structured. Responsibility is shared between different levels of authority. It is difficult to reconcile the parents' interests, long-term ambitions and the organisation of the professionals involved. Over the last twenty years,

5. [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#).

6. The commitments concern target 4.2 "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" and target 4.5 "By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations."

7. It includes goal 5.4 "Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/.

8. Jenet Erickson and Katharine B. Stevens, February 2021, "Universal Child Care: A Bad Deal for Kids? ."

9. Jeff Grabmeier, "Time parents spend with children key to academic success", *Ohio State News*, 4 February 2019

10. *Forbes*, 25 June 2020, "Pourquoi le télétravail est-il facteur d'inégalité pour les femmes ?" (Why is teleworking a source of inequality for women?)

public authorities (at national, regional and local level) have created more and more nurseries to cater for a level of demand that continues to exceed supply. Regrettably, this spending seems to have coincided with a move towards a cheaper, less generous regulatory and organisational approach to the care provided.

14. The long-term existence of certain facilities that look after very young children depends all too often on insecure jobs, often held by women, with no regard for the needs of children, who sometimes lack male role models with whom to identify. This decision, assumed by the public authorities which organise and finance day-care centres, leads to a regular turnover in staff which can be disturbing for the children. To avoid having to deal subsequently with the consequences of under-stimulated children lost in society and deprived of sentimental ties, a sound framework of trust is needed. This means hiring qualified childcare workers, investing in staff training and ensuring the provision of quality care.

15. The aim here is not to compare the various methods applied in the different member States. Each country has chosen the solutions it believed best corresponded to its history and traditions. Some chose kindergartens while others preferred early schooling. No one solution is better than the others. What we should focus on is the quality of the care, in terms of staffing and opening hours. We have often made the mistake of attaching too much importance to the cost alone. Regarding childcare, let us first look at its quality based on the rate of supervisors per children, as well as the total reception hours. All this, while also keeping in mind the obligation to appoint a supervisor and to specify the maximum allotted time for the child to remain in the facility.

16. In response to the parents' needs and the authorities' aims, childcare professionals accompany children towards becoming independent. Child psychiatrist Françoise Dolto endeavoured to create a favourable environment to prepare children gently and gradually for the transition from family to school.¹¹ All nurseries, be they private, public, or voluntary, should share that aim. This responsibility means more than just keeping the children occupied while their parents are at work. Providing quality care requires proper training, as well as the involvement of practitioners and specialists. The professional's role is to prevent the early onset of the emotional disturbances caused when children are taken away from their families too abruptly. The participation of mothers and fathers is to be encouraged. It is reassuring both for the parents and for the children. Unfortunately, employers do not always facilitate this involvement of the parents.

17. The debate about the duration of parental leave at the national and European levels is an interesting one. Women generally want much more flexible arrangements than men regarding working hours. Finland increased parental leave from 12.7 to 14 months. Each parent has the right to 164 days off and a maximum of 69 days can be transferred from one parent to the other. When implementing this reform, the Finnish authorities took on board the makeup of modern families by allowing a single parent to benefit from the full quota allocated to two-parent families.

18. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹² four out of five children grow up in a traditional nuclear family: the proportion of children living with unmarried parents has risen from 10 to 15% over the last decade. The makeup of the modern family has become extremely diverse and increasingly varied (for example with parents living in different towns, shared custody, or same-sex parents). It is not unusual for a child to live in a number of different family environments during childhood. This is the reality that public policies must take into account from now on, otherwise they will not fulfil their essential mission in the best possible way, or policies will be applied without due consideration for particular circumstances. Policy aims must be both general and specific to cater for as many situations as possible.

19. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed perceptions of working hours, which have been reorganised, disrupting regular work habits – although not necessarily to the advantage of parents (particularly mothers) and their children.¹³ Closing day-care centres will have affected not only children's development, disrupting their learning and their social life, but also the psychological well-being of their parents.¹⁴

11. *La Maison verte* is a childcare structure created by Françoise Dolto in 1979. Her lead was followed by other childcare professionals. www.lamaisonverte.asso.fr/presentation.

12. OECD Policy brief on child well-being, November 2019.

13. See Doc. 15311 "Impact of Covid-19 on children's rights".

14. Ibid.

3. The role of families, the State and professionals in children's development

20. Without experience, parents have to improvise and adapt their organisation out of necessity. They are often at their wits' end and need outside help. Balancing work and life is essential. Parents' commitment to the success of a child's early years requires making a series of difficult choices. In many Council of Europe member states, parents are not free to choose their preferred childcare option.

21. The parents' role is central. In order to develop their social, emotional and cognitive learning, children need a strong bond that makes them feel secure. The timing of parent-child interactions plays a vital role. They react to speech, expressions, touch. To establish such a bond, adults need time, as well as physical and emotional closeness. You have to talk to a baby, respond to its signals, listen to it, play with it, kiss it. All this contributes to its socio-emotional and cognitive development. The amount of time parents and children spend together is one of the things that determine the quality of the bond, which in turn provides the basis for harmonious development.

22. Excessive exposure to computer or phone screens and its adverse effects on children's development, especially at an early age, is often linked to that of parents.¹⁵ Screens replace dialogue, fun activities and games that can help develop children's imagination and language skills. They can even alter their behaviour. We need to invest in preventive measures to warn parents of these risks. They have an important role to play. The sanitary crisis has highlighted some recent phenomena. We must recognise that "lockdowns contributed to the radicalisation of screen addictions," says child psychiatrist Richard Delorme.¹⁶

23. The Assembly has had the opportunity to examine the joint responsibility of the father. It invited the member States to do everything in their power to stop perpetuating the stereotyped roles in the private and family sphere and give greater recognition to the father's place in a child's life, including after a divorce.

24. The purpose of policy making is to help parents in this exercise rather than seek to replace them. It provides the framework and the means. To guide parents, Germany has introduced a nationwide network of parental counsellors, called *Elternbegleiter*.¹⁷ Italy adopted a similar course of action in 2012 when it introduced the *Fiocchi in Ospedale* scheme providing psychosocial support in maternity wards. This best practice is designed to support future parents before their baby is born and during the early years, catering to their individual needs. The professionals' role is also to state the obvious: the need for a healthy lifestyle, a suitable environment and the right amount of sleep for the child's age. It is also true that, above all, parents need time to take advantage of these parental training programmes. They do not have enough time to take part in their children's education to prevent and correct certain behavioural problems.

4. Best interests of the child

25. Early childhood is a very important stage; 85% of brain development happens during the first five years of life. As the *Ensemble pour l'éducation* (Together for Education)¹⁸ group has observed, early childhood is both the most promising age in life and also the most vulnerable. Early childhood should be a national issue that transcends all political and professional divides to ensure the necessary quality of services that foster the harmonious development of our children and reinforce the emotional bonding required for their well-being. To achieve this, we in the legislature need to collect information, analyse best practices that help achieve clear aims, assess the impact of reform and gather feedback. Our policies must consider the challenges our societies face and ensure the best interests of the child are respected while leaving parents free to choose how to live their lives. Balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making on this issue is crucial to ensure its relevance and effectiveness.

26. Child psychiatrist Karl Heinz Brisch¹⁹ considers this bonding the most important principle for a child's healthy development. According to him, 25% of children feel insecure. If those closest to the baby do not respond to its signals, they are making it clear to the child that it must overcome its insecurity on its own. This makes the child downplay its need for attention and affection, but deep down it still feels insecure.

15. *Le Figaro*, 15 May 2021, "At the Paris public hospital, in a medical consultation on screen addiction in children".

16. *Le Figaro*, 15 May 2021, "Lockdown has radicalised screen addictions".

17. The *Elternchance* 1 and 2 schemes were introduced eight years ago by the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. www.elternchance.de/.

18. The "Fédération française des Francas", a public utility organisation devoted to adult education, is at the origin of this group. www.ensemblepourleducation.fr/.

19. His personal web site (in German only) can be found here: www.khbrisch.de/.

27. Neuroscientists believe that the presence and involvement of parents (or of another close guardian) are necessary for the child's harmonious development. In this context, the responsibility for children's upbringing lies above all with the parents, who are the family's authority figures and perceived as persons of trust by the child. Unfortunately, many parents clearly do not have the requisite time or skills to accompany their children. I believe that parents should receive more encouragement to become involved. We need employment policies that respect families' commitments and provide help and support.

28. The best interests of the child are of paramount importance for the Council of Europe: because of their extreme vulnerability, children must be given absolute priority whatever the circumstances.²⁰ They are central to all its work to safeguard and develop the rights of the children of today, who are destined to be the adults of tomorrow. Through the standards and tools developed, the best interests of the child must guide efforts to meet children's needs while respecting their rights and personality. Family policies should be devised with this principle in mind to allow each child the opportunity to develop. The Council of Europe is fully committed to ensuring that children have the effective right to equal opportunities. This aim will probably still occupy a high place in the organisation's strategy on children's rights for the period 2022-2027.

5. Strengthening equal opportunities for children

29. In spite of recent improvements resulting from public policies, a number of challenges remain to be met if our societies are to ensure proper protection and prioritise the best interests of the child. As noted in the Council of Europe's Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021),²¹ "The family, whatever its form, is the fundamental unit of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of children [...] Families can, however, be confronted with numerous challenges: the economic crisis has exposed many families to unemployment and insecurity about the future. Reconciling work and family life remains difficult for many parents and in particular for single parents, who are mostly women."

30. Of all the obstacles to equal opportunities, poverty is the greatest.²² Although poverty has significantly declined in Europe, the number of children exposed to extreme poverty has risen. The situation is worrying, and the Assembly will soon have a fresh opportunity to address the issue.²³ As the European Commission noted in its 2013 Recommendation,²⁴ it is important to prevent the transmission of poverty across generations, and "investing in children [to break] the cycle of disadvantage" is therefore necessary. The role of public policy here is to provide assistance adapted to the needs of vulnerable children, including specific protection for children living in poverty, those with a disability, those suffering from discrimination and migrant children. Member States have sought to enhance the protection of vulnerable children through a variety of projects including a guaranteed minimum income in Cyprus, an aid package for single mothers in Belgium, a benefit for disadvantaged children from Denmark's Social Investment Fund, an adjustment to the conditions for receiving income support in France as additional help to single mothers along with a back-to-work support scheme, or programmes for preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty.²⁵

31. Measures in favour of early childhood must support equality of opportunity. In Germany, all children from the age of one until they enter primary school have a legal right to care and pre-school education, in a childcare facility or at home.²⁶ In Luxembourg a 20-hour multilingual education programme is offered free of charge to all children aged one to three attending a collective childcare facility. Between the ages of three and four all children can attend early education free of charge, which allows children to familiarise themselves with the Luxembourgish language and facilitates literacy in German. There are also supports for parents in need, in the form of service vouchers. In general, complementing targeted measures with a comprehensive early

20. European Court of Human Rights: *Rahimi v. Greece*, paragraph 108; *Popov v. France*, paragraph 140.

21. [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2016-2021\)](#).

22. On this point it is worth noting that 17% of children across the OECD live in single-parent families and are three times more likely to be poor than a child growing up in a two-parent family.

23. It was addressed for the first time in 2014, leading to the adoption by the Assembly of [Resolution 1995 \(2014\)](#) "Ending child poverty in Europe". Our committee has just appointed Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC) rapporteur for the report on "[Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty](#)".

24. Rec 2013/112/UE "Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage" and the European Commission's report (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) of April 2014.

25. [This programme is run by Eurodiaconia](#), a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice. It receives EU funding to fight against extreme poverty.

26. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-iv/early-childhood-education-and-care-ecec-systems-in-participating-jurisdictions_9789264233515-4-en#page5.

childhood care and education policy helps to offer equal opportunities to all children. Subsidies for early childhood services make them more accessible and affordable for the poorest families and help to avoid inequalities.

6. The first 1 000 days

32. The first 1 000 days are when the most spectacular development of the brain takes place. This period begins shortly before birth and ends around the age of two. Young children have a need for social stimuli, such as faces and facial expressions; the body, touch and contact; and a voice they recognise. At 7 months, a baby is already aware of belonging to a group. At 18 months, a child knows how to help. And between 12 and 15 months, it becomes aware of itself and acquires thinking skills. It is a period during which children need quality care.

33. The first 1 000 days are a subject of extensive research, particularly in neuroscience and educational science. Researchers see them as an opportunity for multidisciplinary interventions to come together to protect the best interests of the child. It is a risk-based approach but framed by assumptions that strengthen protections.

34. By taking responsibility for the first 1 000 days, the member States would be placing early childhood high on their list of priorities and guaranteeing a high level of protection of the child's best interests. Family policy should be a national issue that transcends all political and professional divides to ensure an effective contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1, 3, 4, 10 and 11²⁷). Be it to identify early interventions or preventive practices, the first 1 000 days are about children's needs and helping their families. They are a time for cognitive and emotional development and they shed light on interactions.

35. This strategy, supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), is fully in line with its definition of health.²⁸ The provisions broadly encompass the needs of children and parents, including those in vulnerable or special situations (disability, parental depression, premature birth, etc.). Because of the child's extreme plasticity and exceptional learning capacity, early action, however minor, is proportionally much more effective. Psychiatrists have shown that this support can prevent the onset of traumas and inequalities.

36. In Norway,²⁹ early action consists of inclusive pedagogical programmes. It is one of the only countries in Europe to guarantee every child a place in a nursery. Opening hours are adjusted to the parents' timetables. In Portugal, since 2008 particular attention has been given to the most vulnerable, to avoid discrimination. As a result, only 1% of children attend special education institutions.

37. Denmark has made considerable efforts to take care of parents and their babies even during pregnancy. Well before their baby is born, parents receive very useful information about breastfeeding, additional foods, vaccinations, medical examinations, the best position for the baby to sleep in, accident prevention, the harm smoking can do. There are even nurses who visit them at home to advise and assist them. The State pays low-income families an allowance to help parents maintain a decent standard of living and boost their confidence in society. Nurseries are open up to 50 hours a week to allow for parents' working hours. In this way, 90% of children between one and two years of age attend nurseries. In the Netherlands, the local authorities cater on a universal basis for parents' needs in terms of health and welfare. This strategy is gaining ground in other countries, including the United Kingdom, France and the United States.

38. In France, President Macron has made "the first 1 000 days" one of the priorities of his presidency. Announced as a "new Pact for children", the aims of the strategy are to prevent harm to the child's best interests from the very beginning of the pregnancy; to combat all forms of violence; to guarantee that everyone's rights are respected; and to provide better protection for children. A team of 18 experts chaired by neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik was set up in September 2019. It handed in its report in September 2020. The method proposed is cross-cutting. It is an "approach centred on children's needs, their abilities and the conditions of their psychological, emotional, cognitive and social development". It also focuses on "the child's

27. SDG 1 "No poverty"; SDG 3 "Good health and well-being"; SDG 4 "Quality education" (particularly SDG 4.2); SDG 10 "Reduced inequalities" and SDG 11 "Sustainable cities and communities".

28. "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity", www.who.int/fr/about/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions.

29. The source for the national experiences is the EU Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4c526047-6f3c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>.

whole environment, and in particular the parents, the extended family, peers and elders, professionals, and the responsibility of society to take care of children and support their parents.” The findings of this team, which drew on other international experiences, are to be published.

39. The European Union has entered the early childhood sector in no uncertain terms with its new “pillar of social rights”. It presented its strategy in February 2021³⁰ and supports the consensus most favourable to children, to help them “grow, learn and develop.” In December 2020, it published a “toolkit for early childhood education and care (ECEC).” It lists examples of good practice for delivering very high quality, inclusive services to parents and children. It also sets out guidelines for member States indicating the level of quality to be attained: services are available, accessible and affordable; well-qualified staff are available in sufficient number, benefit from quality initial education and training and continuing professional development; provision of ECEC is framed by a pedagogical framework which respects the abilities of every child, supports their well-being; governance of the ECEC systems is organised efficiently to respond to the needs of all children and families; and lastly, monitoring and regular evaluations are in place so that reviews can be carried out and improvements made over time based on an empirical approach and on the experience and satisfaction of those involved.

40. On 15 December 2020, EuroChild and other civil society organisations launched the “First Years, First Priority” campaign. Neuroscience research reveals that the first 1 000 days affect the child’s whole life. These associations regret that certain public policies do not place the best interests of the child at the heart of their action and do not adopt an active strategy against inequalities. The campaign also concerns the most vulnerable among us: Roma, children with disabilities, migrants and refugees, and those who live in extreme poverty. For these civil society stakeholders, the health crisis is a rare opportunity to change the system. It should oblige our countries to take ambitious steps to combat poverty and inequalities.³¹

7. Investing in early childhood

41. We must clearly give our children priority in our investments. Children born into an unstable environment find it harder than others to pass through the different ages. By making this our priority, we could prevent many unpleasant situations. According to a recent study often cited by UNICEF, the rate of return on investment in early childhood could be as high as 13.7%.³² Investing in early childhood is a societal choice: it requires widespread support. In connection with the “Early Moments Matter” campaign,³³ UNICEF has launched an appeal to national governments and private sector partners. The purpose is to invest urgently in services which offer young children, especially the poorest among them, the best possible start in life; to extend access to effective early childhood development services that cover the essential needs in homes, schools, community structures and health care establishments; to make early childhood policies a national priority and involve the private sector; to collect data on key early childhood development indicators and monitor progress; to provide a special framework for early childhood programmes and more effective co-ordination of initiatives across the different sectors; to stimulate demand for quality early childhood services.

42. UNICEF’s aim is that parents and people with children in their care have the time and support they need to bring up happy, healthy children. This campaign calls for at least six months’ paid leave for both parents; spaces set aside for breastfeeding and paid breaks for mothers who go back to work; affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare services; and permanent allowances to help all families with children.

43. The OECD has conducted a vast international survey³⁴ of 7 000 five-year-old children in Estonia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Its conclusions are crystal clear. “Strong early learning and well-being is the best investment families and governments can make to ensure success at an individual and system level.” The survey adds that children’s early skills are highly predictive of their later well-being and success in education and employment. The information collected mainly concerned preliminary data on literacy, maths, self-control and socio-emotional skills. It made it possible to measure the results of public policies on their general well-being; their satisfaction in life; their physical and mental health; their level of education; their attitude to work, money, socio-economic status and citizenship.

30. [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee](#).

31. “First Years, First Priority” campaign, “a fair start for every child in Europe”.

32. García, Jorge Luis, et al., “The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program, Human Capital and Economic Opportunity Global Working Group”, working document 2016-035, Chicago, December 2016, p. 1.

33. www.unicef.org/reports/early-moments-matter-every-child.

34. The results of this survey are available in English at www.oecd.org/education/school/early-learning-and-child-well-being-study/International_Early_Learning_and_Child_Well-being_Study_Infographic.pdf.

44. Beyond the economic advantage of the decision to invest massively in early childhood, this success is very gratifying on a personal scale. It helps young infants to find the resources they need for their inner security and their basic trust in life itself. This is useful luggage when starting out in life, developing one's social confidence and building a balanced personality more resilient to frustrations and traumas.

8. Conclusions

45. "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men", said Frederick Douglass back in the 19th century.³⁵ That statement is just as true today. Offering every child a good start in life should be our guiding light in a broken world where millions of children spend their early years in deplorable conditions.³⁶

46. Under America's 1 900 billion dollar stimulus package, President Biden³⁷ has made provision for permanent monthly family allowances and the building of numerous affordable nurseries and childcare structures.³⁸ The plan calls for more visits to parents and the monitoring of vulnerable children by specialists and officials, in order to guarantee their protection and their harmonious development.

47. Europe has less ground to make up when it comes to investing in early childhood.³⁹ It nevertheless needs to guarantee absolute protection of children's best interests. The matter of the outcome of the health crisis should enable us also to anticipate a qualitative leap in our family policies. To achieve that goal, the different levels of public authority, parents and stakeholders will have to join forces. Enabling children to reach their full potential is a challenging goal. We know it is a profitable, responsible, ecological investment.

48. The first 1 000 days should spread to all the member States. I shall refer mainly to the findings of the team of 18 French experts:

- Investing massively in our children's future gives us hope. We must protect the most vulnerable children. Taking their fragilities into account means not stigmatising their environment or their living conditions. The authorities need to improve the diagnosis of perinatal depressions: provide support on the different aspects of parenthood; provide better treatment to psychologically disturbed young children; look out for signs of domestic violence; assist parents with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities; and identify families in greatest need.
- Without sufficient resources, we will not be able to meet the needs. The aim is to give parents more time or create conditions for them to find the time; to build childcare facilities; to reduce social inequalities; and to prepare the future of our communities.
- According to the theory of change, reforms must be continuously assessed and monitored in order to contribute to the continuing improvement of policy and the revision of national strategies at regular intervals. That also means allocating sufficient resources to university research.

49. I can only welcome the new strategy the Council of Europe is preparing on the rights of the child. Equality of opportunity and inclusion should remain at the heart of our Organisation's priorities for the period 2022-2027.

50. Parents and professionals who look after children play a key role in their development and their physical, mental, and psychological well-being. They must provide the security and love children need for their growth. As the *Tages Anzeiger* in Switzerland suggested,⁴⁰ "Mix that with a good dose of common sense, intuition and reflection and there is little chance of getting it wrong." The State must create the right conditions for adults to assume their role and support their children's development under the best possible circumstances. In protecting children from sickness, poverty, and lack of affection through widespread and lasting investment in family policies, States are sure to reap the economic and social benefits and build solid foundations for a peaceful and prosperous future.

35. Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), former slave who became a senior American official. The quote refers to the beginning of compulsory schooling in the United States.

36. Lake, Anthony, "Applying the Science: How what we are learning about brain development should shape policies, practical action, and public advocacy", *Early Childhood Matters: Advances in early childhood development*, Bernard van Leer Foundation, No. 125, The Hague, 2016, p. 13.

37. *New York Times*, 24 March 2021, "[Biden Plots a Revolution for America's Children](#)"

38. Childcare apparently costs only 7% of parents' income

39. *New York Times*, 24 March 2021, *ibid.*

40. *Tages Anzeiger*, 15 April 2014, "[Die ersten drei Lebensjahre sind entscheidend](#)"