



Where do rich countries  
stand on childcare?

Anna Gromada and Dominic Richardson

June 2021

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# Where do rich countries stand on childcare?

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In the 20 years preceding the COVID-19 crisis, average spending on services for families – including childcare – in high-income countries, saw notable increases relative to falls in cash benefit spending. Nevertheless, even before COVID-19, some of the world’s richest countries were failing to offer comprehensive childcare solutions to all families. In some instances, this reflected their policy priorities rather than available resources. The COVID-19 pandemic also challenged children’s education, care and well-being as parents struggled to balance their responsibilities for childcare and employment, with a disproportionate burden placed on women. In the context of lockdown and school closures, childcare was one of the worst affected family services and had a significant knock-on effect.

UNICEF has previously called for a set of four key family-friendly policies: paid parental leave, breastfeeding support, accessible quality childcare and child benefits (UNICEF, n.d.; Gromada et al., 2020). This report shows how governments can help parents through paid parental leave, followed by affordable and high-quality childcare. Using the most recent comparable data, it assesses the parental leave and childcare policies in the 41 high-income countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, we call them the ‘rich countries’.

Childcare policies play a key role in development for children and work-life balance for adults. The report concludes with nine recommendations for how policies can be improved to provide comprehensive solutions to all families.

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<sup>1</sup> Memberships as of 2020. For this reason, Colombia is not included.

## League Table

The 41 rich countries use different combinations of parental leave and organized childcare to help parents care for their children. The League Table ranks each country on eight indicators grouped into four dimensions: leave, access, quality and affordability of childcare.

### Indicators used in the League Table

#### 1. Leave

- a. Weeks of paid job-protected leave available to mothers in full-pay equivalent in 2018
- b. Weeks of paid job-protected leave reserved for fathers in full-pay equivalent in 2018

#### 2. Access

- a. Children under 3 years of age using early childhood education and care for at least one hour a week in 2019
- b. Children in organized learning one year before starting school in 2018 (official Sustainable Development Goal)

#### 3. Quality

- a. Children-to-teacher ratio in organized childcare in 2018
- b. Minimal qualifications to become a teacher in formal childcare

#### 4. Affordability

- a. Cost for a couple of two earners on average wage and two children (after government subsidies) in 2020
- b. Cost for a single parent on low earnings and two children (after government subsidies) in 2020



FIGURE 1: League Table – Indicators of national childcare policies

Rank	Country	Leave	Access	Quality	Affordability
1	Luxembourg	5	3	13	16
2	Iceland	19	5	1	15
3	Sweden	9	4	17	10
4	Norway	6	12	20	8
5	Germany	13	21	9	4
6	Portugal	12	15	10	12
7	Latvia	16	24	2	7
8	Denmark	27	2	5	17
9	Republic of Korea	4	10	26	14
10	Estonia	3	32	17	8
11	Finland	15	19	4	24
12	Lithuania	7	25	11	22
13	Austria	10	23	27	6
14	Malta	32	17		1
15	Italy	28	28	14	1
16	Greece	29	26	6	11
17	Slovenia	14	20	8	32
18	Belgium	26	8	21	23
19	France	22	7	24	25
20	Spain	25	11	23	19
21	Japan	1	31	22	26
22	Canada	23	16		21
23	Croatia	17	30		13
24	Hungary	11	36	16	20
25	Chile	24	29	29	1
26	Bulgaria	8	38		18
27	Poland	21	33	7	27
28	Netherlands	31	1	28	30
29	Romania	2	39		27
30	Mexico	33	9	31	
31	Israel	34	6	32	31
32	Czechia	20	37	19	29
33	New Zealand	39	27	3	36
34	Turkey	35	41	30	5
35	United Kingdom	36	13		35
36	Ireland	38	14		33
37	Australia	37	34	12	34
38	Switzerland	40	18	25	37
39	Cyprus	30	22		39
40	United States	41	35	15	38
41	Slovakia	18	40	33	40

**Note:** A **yellow** background indicates a place in the top third of the ranking, **pink** denotes the middle third, and **purple** the bottom third. The blank cells indicate that there are no up-to-date comparable data available. The rankings in the table were produced as follows: (1) a z-score for each indicator was calculated (reversed where necessary so that a higher score represents a more positive condition); (2) the mean of the two z-scores within each dimension was calculated; (3) the z-score for each mean was calculated and served as a basis for ranking a given dimension; (4) the mean of the four ranks was calculated and served as a basis for the final ranking. If two countries had the same average of four ranks, the average of four z-scores was used to determine their position. The exact values and sources of all indicators are shown in the Appendix.

## Main findings

- Luxembourg, Iceland and Sweden occupy the top places in the League Table. The best performers manage to combine affordability with quality of organized childcare. They also offer generous leave to both mothers and fathers, giving parents choice how to take care of their children. However, no country is a leader on all four fronts suggesting that there is room for improvement, even among the more family-friendly countries.
- Slovakia, the United States, and Cyprus occupy the bottom places of the League Table. Weak investments in leave and childcare appear to indicate that childcare is seen more as a private rather than a public responsibility.
- Japan, Romania, Estonia and the Republic of Korea rank highest on leave entitlements. Romania and Estonia have the longest leave available for mothers, while Japan and Korea have the longest leave reserved for fathers. Initially, very few fathers used this leave but the uptake has increased each year.
- The United States is the only rich country without nationwide, statutory, paid maternity leave, paternity leave or parental leave. However, nine states and Washington, DC, offer their own paid family leave. Some employers offer 12 weeks of unpaid leave but only six in ten workers are eligible. In practice, only one in five private sector workers qualifies for paid leave.<sup>2</sup>
- Iceland, Latvia, New Zealand, Finland and Denmark have the highest quality of childcare. Denmark, Finland and New Zealand combine a low children-to-staff ratio with high qualifications of caregivers to ensure that children get sufficient attention from trained personnel.
- Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland have the least affordable childcare for the middle class. A couple of two earners of average wage would need to spend between a third and a half of one salary to pay for two children in childcare.
- Although most rich countries subsidize childcare for disadvantaged groups, a single parent on low earnings would still need to spend between a third and a half of their salary in Slovakia, Cyprus and the United States to keep two children in childcare.
- Countries with shorter paid leave for mothers – but longer leave reserved for fathers – tend to have more children aged under 3 in childcare centres. However, even some of the world's richest countries, such as Switzerland, have both short leave and low enrolment in childcare.
- Countries with high rates of satisfaction with childcare tend to have high enrolment and few parents struggling with childcare cost.

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<sup>2</sup> However, investments in childcare in the United States are rapidly increasing, especially due to the American Rescue Plan; see US Department of the Treasury, 2021.



## Childcare in rich countries

Childcare should provide affection, protection, stimulation and nutrition and enable children to develop social, emotional and cognitive skills. These goals can be achieved through high-quality childcare both within and outside the family. Rather than viewing one form of care as inherently better for children, this report looks at the policy mix and the scope of choice offered to parents who decide to stay with their children, as well as those who decide to use organized care.

## Leave for mothers

The vast majority of children are cared for by their parents, from birth and during infancy, whether leave policies and care options are available or not. Well-designed maternity, paternity and parental leave<sup>3</sup> can help parents during the first few years of a child's life without the fear of losing employment or experiencing poverty at a critical point in the child's life course.

Prenatal maternity leave helps mothers prepare for the birth of the child. It can help protect their health, and that of the baby, in the later stages of pregnancy, for example by enabling them to take a break from hazardous work. Maternity leave following birth allows mothers to recover from pregnancy and childbirth and to bond with their child. It facilitates the development of early and secure attachments – vital for both the child and the caregiver's mental health and well-being – and supports breastfeeding, which leads to better health for both mother and child.<sup>4</sup> Well-paid, job-protected leave from work helps female employees maintain their income and attachment to the labour market, although leave that is too long<sup>5</sup> can have the opposite effect.

As mothers in all rich countries are more likely to take parental leave, it is added to maternity leave to obtain the total leave available to mothers. Maternity leave, which typically starts just before childbirth, tends to be short and well-paid, averaging 19 weeks across the rich countries and paid at 77 per cent of the national average wage. Parental leave that follows maternity leave tends to be long and paid at a lower rate: averaging 36 weeks paid at 36 per cent of the average wage. In 14 of the 41 rich countries it is fully paid for an employee with average earnings, although some countries use a cap.<sup>6</sup>

In the past half-century, leave available to mothers has been substantially extended. Back in the 1970s, it used to be short – 17 weeks on average – with seven countries (Australia, Canada, Iceland, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, the United States and Switzerland) offering no entitlements whatsoever. By 1990, the length of leave had more than doubled to 40 weeks on average, while Canada and the Republic of Korea introduced the entitlement. By 2018, it averaged 51 weeks with the US being the only rich country with no national statutory entitlements.

3 Maternity leave is job-protected leave for employed women, typically starting just before the time of childbirth (or adoption in some countries). Paternity leave is job-protected leave for fathers at the time of childbirth or soon after. Parental leave is job-protected leave for employed parents, which usually follows the maternity leave. It tends to be longer than maternity leave and paid at a lower rate, if at all.

4 The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend that mothers should initiate breastfeeding within one hour of birth and infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life to achieve optimal growth, development and health. After that, infants should receive nutritionally adequate and safe complementary foods while breastfeeding continues until the child is at least 2 years old. The WHO and UNICEF have jointly launched guidance called 'Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding' for countries wishing to develop a strategy on this issue. See WHO, UNICEF, n.d.

5 Thevenon and Solaz (2013) show that the effect of paid leave duration on female employment turns from positive to negative at around two years of leave across OECD countries, but caution that this estimate must not be over-interpreted.

6 All full-pay equivalents refer to a percentage of income for a person earning the average wage. However, most countries use the cap. For example, a working mother in Finland would receive for the first 56 weekdays of leave 90 per cent of her earnings up to the cap of €59,444 (annual income) and 32.5 per cent for any income exceeding this level. After 56 weekdays, she would receive 70 per cent of earnings up to the cap of €38,636 (annual income); 40 per cent from €38,637 to €59,444; and 25 per cent for any annual earnings above €59,444.

## Leave for fathers

Leave reserved for fathers helps them bond with their children and supports the redistribution of childcare between mothers and fathers. However, working fathers typically face professional and cultural barriers that prevent them from staying with their child. To encourage uptake, almost all rich countries have introduced leave reserved for fathers on a 'use-it-or-lose-it' basis.

Leave for fathers tends to be substantially shorter than maternity leave (usually 1–2 weeks) but it is paid at a higher rate. It is a relative novelty. Back in the 1970s, leave reserved for fathers was unheard-of in 27 out of 30 rich countries with available data. In the remaining three countries, it was of symbolic duration: 1 day in Spain, 2 days in Luxembourg and 3 days in Belgium. By 1990, two more countries introduced such leave: Sweden (7 days) and Denmark (10 days). By 2000, 11 rich countries added days reserved for fathers on the use-it-or-lose-it basis. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, paternity leave became a new norm. By 2018, 35 countries had such leave, including eight countries where fathers were entitled to over three months. In 2018, paternity leave was offered in all rich countries apart from Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Slovakia, Switzerland and the United States.

In Canada – where women make 85 per cent of all parental claims and take longer leave – leave for the second parent was introduced in 2019. All parents – including same-sex and adoptive parents – are entitled to five weeks of leave. The new measure explicitly intends to promote gender equality by incentivizing all parents to take leave when welcoming a child to the world (Government of Canada, 2018).

The rich countries are constantly building new paternity policies not yet captured by the comparable data sources. For example, in 2020, New Zealand extended paid parental leave from 18 to 26 weeks<sup>7</sup>, while Australia included greater flexibility.<sup>8</sup> Spain increased its paternity leave from 4.3 to 16 weeks in 2021.<sup>9</sup>

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7 The Parental Leave and Employment Protection Amendment Bill increased the leave from 18 to 22 weeks from 1 July 2018 and further to 26 weeks from 1 July 2020.

8 In July 2020, the Australian Government's Paid Parental Leave was amended to include greater flexibility, including splitting it so it can be taken over two periods within two years of a child's birth. Previously it could only be used over one continuous 18-week period. The programme now allows 12 weeks (60 days) of continuous leave and 6 weeks (30 days) that can be used flexibly and by either parent on days they have primary care of the child.

9 Article 12.2 of RD-Ley 6/2019, de 1 de marzo (published in Official State Gazette, BOE in Spanish, on 7 March), applicable from 1 April 2019.

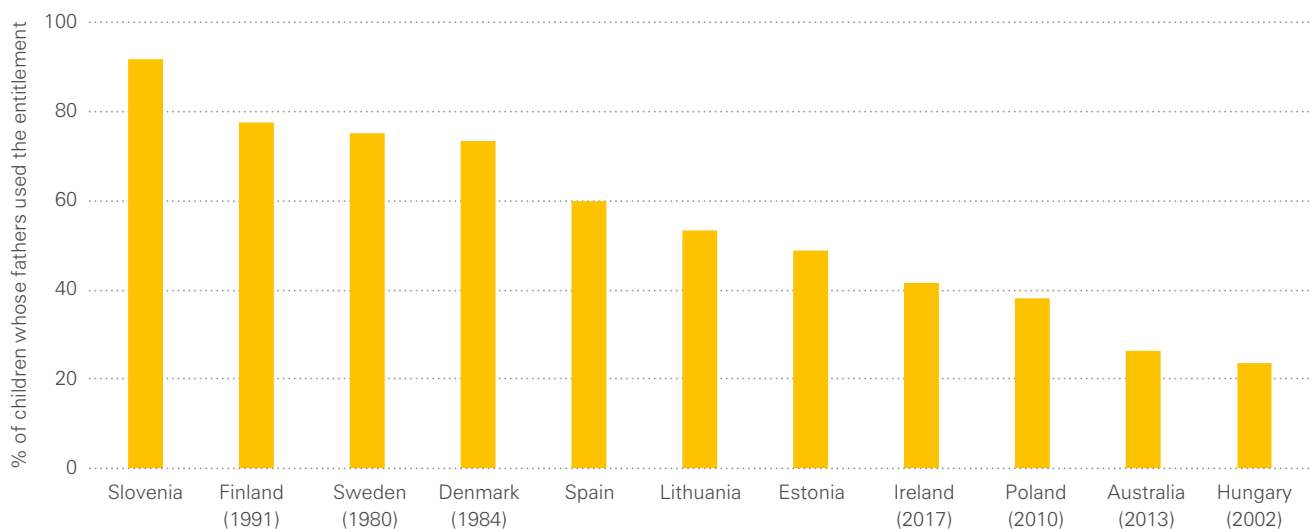
## Take-up of paternity leave

Leave reserved for fathers makes up on average one tenth of total leave. It constitutes at least one third of all available paid leave in only four countries: Iceland, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Portugal. In 11 countries with comparable data, the take-up averages 55 per cent, ranging from 24 per cent in Hungary to 92 per cent in Slovenia (see Figure 2). The take-up reflects cultural differences and gender norms whereby childcare is viewed as a mother's job, but it also reflects the age of the policy. For example, in Denmark and Sweden, where such policy dates back to the 1980s, three in four fathers use some form of leave today. Yet, even the Nordics associated with higher gender equality had low take-up when paternity leave was introduced, showing that such policies need time to take hold.

Japan offers the longest entitlement to paid leave for fathers: 30 weeks of full-pay equivalent. When it was introduced in 2007, only 1.6 per cent of fathers used it. By 2019, the number went up by five times (7.5 per cent), including a record 16.4 per cent of government workers. In June 2021, Japan introduced more flexible paternity leave as the government wanted to increase the uptake to 30 per cent by 2025.<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 2: Take-up is higher in countries that introduced paternity leave a long time ago

Percentage of children whose fathers used paid paternity leave or paternity leave benefits in 2016



**Note:** publicly administered paternity leave or benefits (employer-provided leave or unpaid leave excluded). Data for Hungary refer to 2014. The year of the introduction of the paternity leave policy is in brackets.

**Source:** OECD Family Database.

10 The 2021 reform allows fathers to take a total of four weeks off within eight weeks of childbirth and give shorter prior notice of their absence to their employers (two weeks instead of one month). See: <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/000743975.pdf> and <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/topics/bukyoku/soumu/houritu/204.html>

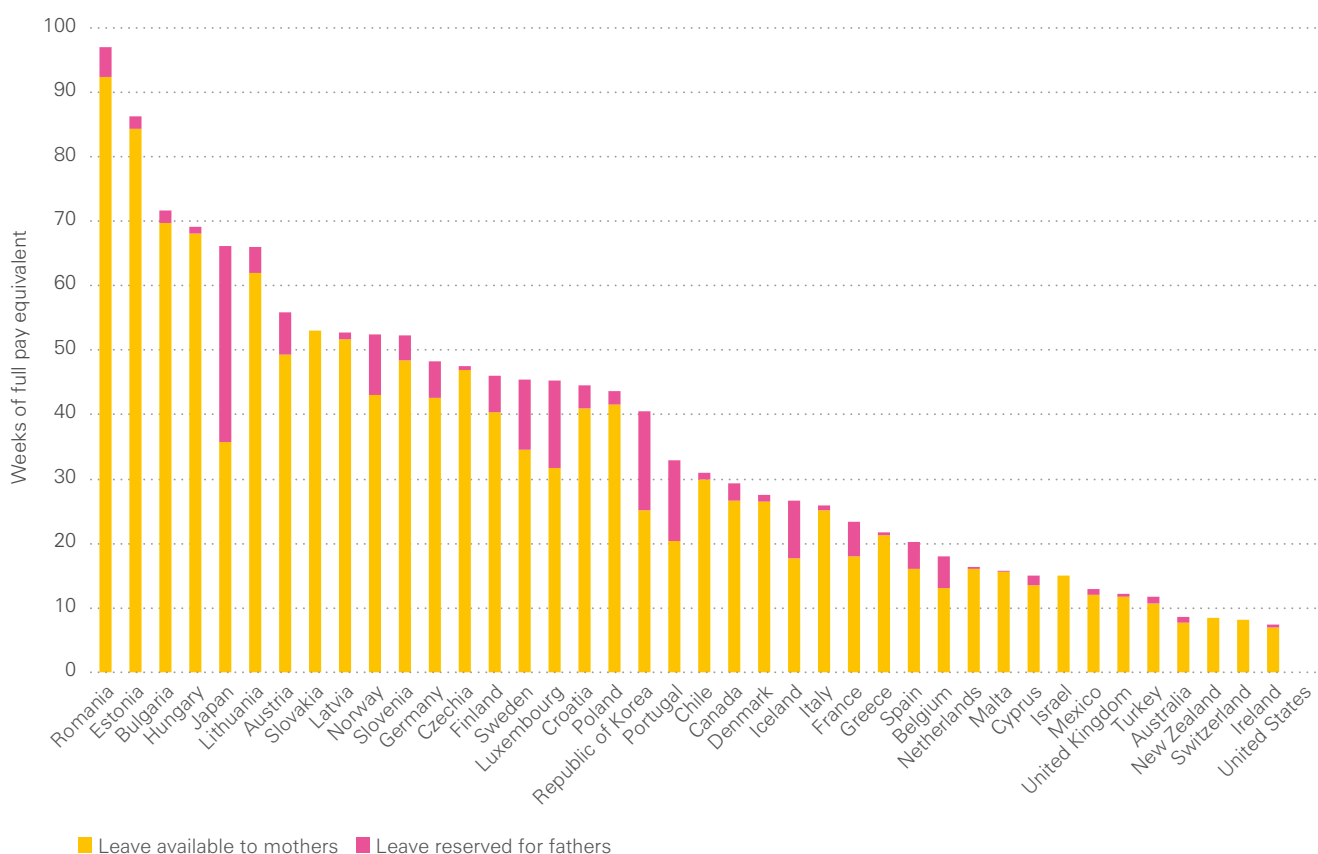
## Money: leave payment rates and sources of financing

The previous section discussed the length of leave to show how much time parents can spend with their child. However, the length can be a misleading indicator of policy quality because it is paid at very different rates. In some countries, it is impossible for parents to live off the payment, while caring for the child. Across rich countries, an average woman would be paid two thirds of her earnings during maternity and parental leave: ranging from a quarter of her pay in Finland to full pay in Chile, Israel, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands and Spain.

Full-pay equivalents show the generosity of the entitlement. They are weeks of leave multiplied by the payment rate. For example, if a woman is entitled to 10 weeks of leave at 50 per cent of her usual salary, her full-pay equivalent is 5 weeks. When calculated in this way, the most generous leave is offered by four post-communist countries: Romania (92 weeks of full pay), Estonia (84 weeks of full pay), Bulgaria (70 weeks of full pay) and Hungary (68 weeks of full pay). At the other end of the scale, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland offer less than 10 weeks of full pay (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Leave reserved for fathers makes up one tenth of total leave for parents

Leave available for mothers and reserved for fathers recalculated into weeks of full pay (2018)



**Note:** The average payment rate calculated for an individual on national average wage.  
**Source:** OECD Family Database. Data for Canada: authors calculations reflecting the extension to Employment Insurance shared Parental benefits in 2019<sup>11</sup>, applying a net replacement rate of 53.2 per cent of average wage<sup>12</sup>.

11 <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2018/09/new-five-week-parental-sharing-to-start-in-march-2019.html>  
 12 [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2\\_1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf)

Most leave systems are financed by a social insurance scheme for employees, which sometimes includes the self-employed. In Malta, leave is financed by employers but out-of-work parents insured in the past are covered by the state. In these countries, this raises a question about the parents who are not part of the system. Tax-funded systems could make it easier for uninsured parents to access leave entitlements, with Denmark coming closest to such a model. A few other systems are financed by both taxes and insurance contributions: usually the insured receive an income-related leave while the rest get a flat rate, as happens in Croatia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway and Poland, among others (MISSOC, 2020).

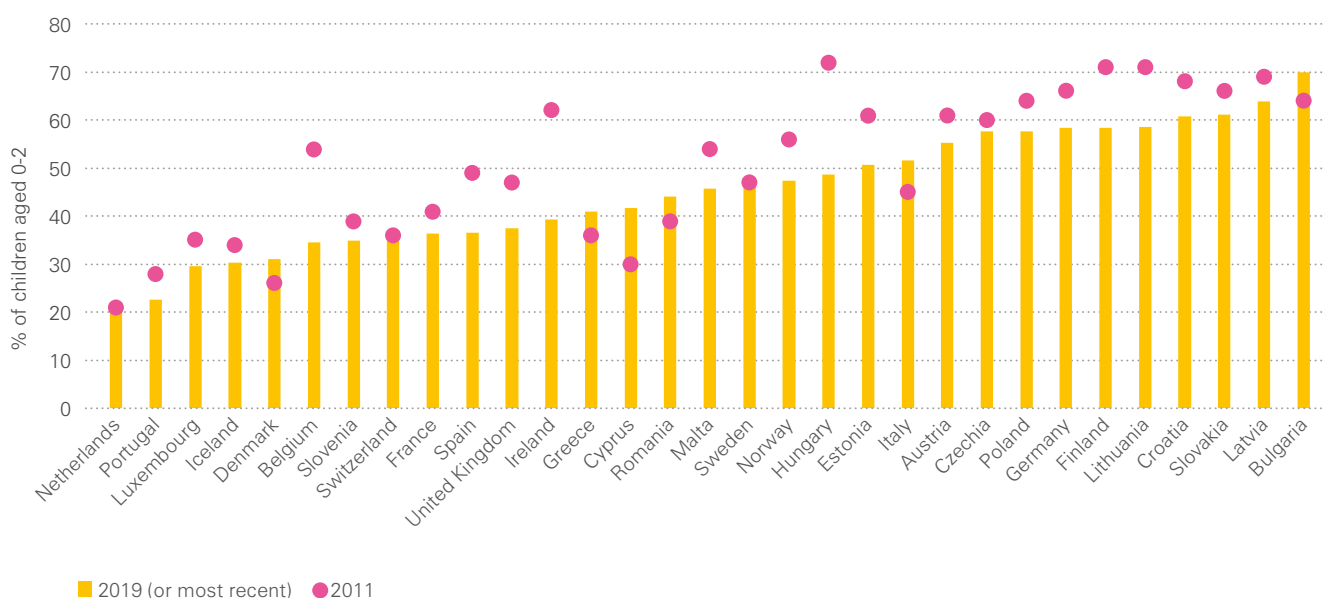
## After the leave

A typical length of leave available to mothers in rich countries is 55 weeks (32 weeks when recalculated into weeks of full pay). Yet, the end of paid childcare leave usually does not coincide with the start of entitlements to affordable childcare, leaving many families with young children struggling to fill this gap. The end of parental leave should be aligned with availability of childcare to ensure there are no gaps in the provision of childcare as parents look to return to work (OECD, 2009).

After the end of parental leave, some parents continue to care for their children full-time at home. Approximately half of children aged under 3 are cared for only by their parents but the proportion varies from 22 per cent in the Netherlands to 70 per cent in Bulgaria. Between 2011 and 2019, the percentage of children cared for exclusively by their parents fell from 51 per cent to 45 per cent as more parents were likely to use help in childcare – primarily through the use of organized care.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 4: In the last decade, parents were less likely to be the sole caregivers and more likely to use childcare

Children under 3 years of age cared for solely by their parents in 2011 and 2019



**Note:** Most recent refers to 2019 apart from the Netherlands (2020), Iceland (2018) and the UK (2018).

**Source:** Eurostat ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living\\_conditions\\_in\\_Europe\\_-\\_childcare\\_arrangements](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_childcare_arrangements)).

<sup>13</sup> Across the 28 EU countries, the proportion of children under 3 years of age who use early childhood education and care (ECEC) for at least one hour weekly rose from 27 per cent in 2012 to 36 per cent in 2019 (calculations based on Eurostat indicator [ilc\_caindformal])

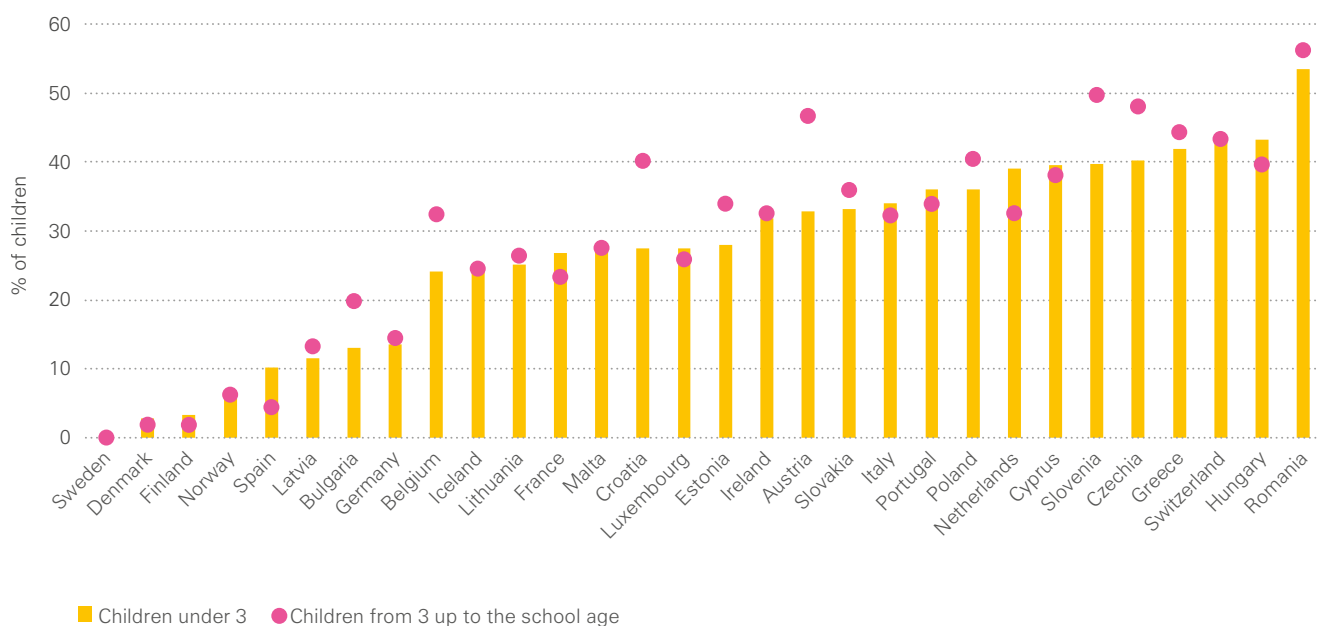
Even if family care is a positive experience for most children, it can weigh heavily on caregivers, especially if they are experiencing a time or financial crunch. For many parents, their childhood experiences, mental health and well-being will affect their parenting ability; and successful parenting will become a learnt, not inherent, skill. Caring for a child can be one of life’s most gratifying experiences. Still, without adequate support, parents can become stressed, exhausted and forced to make excessive sacrifices in their education, employment and social life. The next section looks at the informal and formal childcare that can support them.

## Informal care

Some parents rely on informal care, or care provided without remuneration by relatives, friends or neighbours. In rich countries, 27 per cent of children under 3 and 29 per cent of children from age 3 up to the school age rely on such care for at least an hour a week. This, however, ranges from close to around zero in the Nordic countries to over 50 per cent in Romania. Low informal care figures reflect comprehensive provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC), especially childcare guarantees, or legal entitlements of access to formal childcare.

FIGURE 5: Informal care is almost non-existent in the Nordics

% of children receiving informal childcare for at least one hour a week by age group, 2019



**Notes:** The proportion of children using informal childcare arrangements during a typical week; data refer to 2019 except Iceland (2018).  
**Source:** Eurostat [ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_caindothor/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_caindothor/default/table?lang=en) (last accessed 13 May 2021).



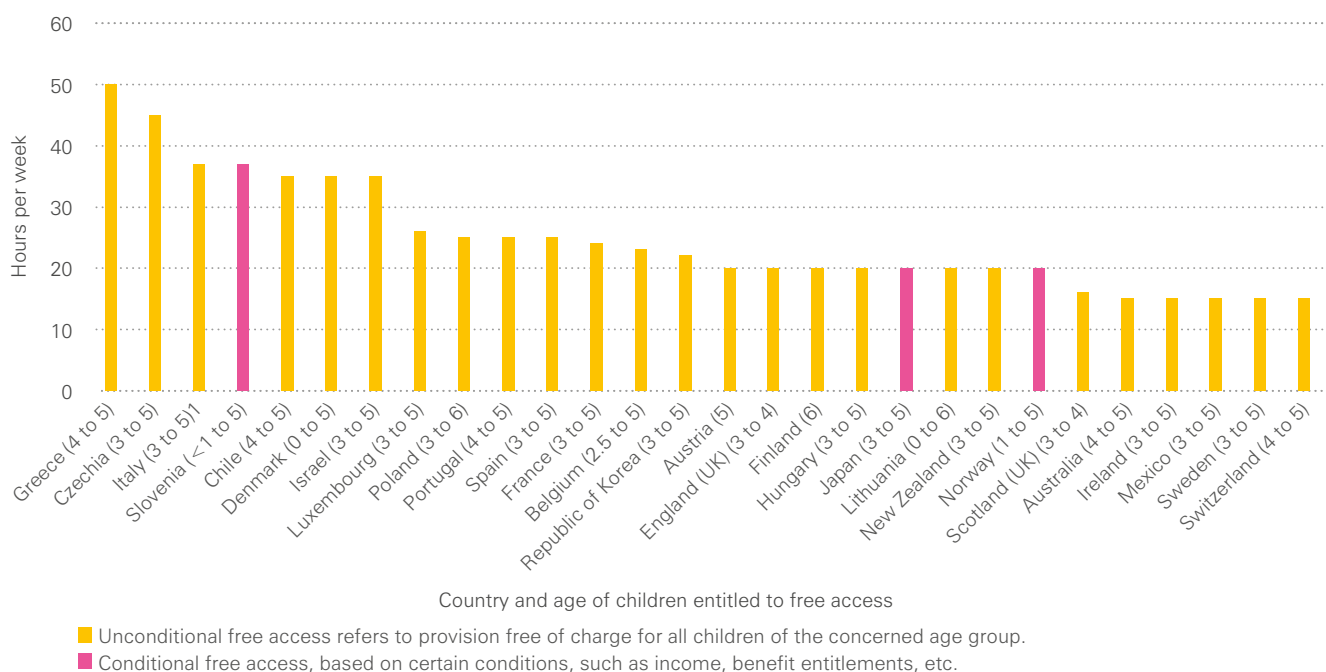
## Formal care

When parental leave ends, some children attend organized childcare. It can relieve fatigued parents and enable them to return to work or attain a balance between paid work, self-care and caring for others (Brilli et al., 2016). Such care, if of high quality, benefits children by fostering cognitive and social-emotional skills. Interactions with other children support children's social, emotional and behavioural development, giving them skills they can use in school and in their lives outside school. Early education and care may be especially beneficial in preventing children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and children whose parents left education early, from falling behind their peers in cognitive development in the early years (Heckman and Raut, 2016). In this way, access to early caring and educational experiences outside the home can have an equalizing effect on children's development and life chances. The main challenge is to ensure that childcare is **accessible, affordable, equitable** and **high quality**.

## Access

Target 4.2 set out in the Sustainable Development Goals mandates that all children should have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education. All 28 rich countries with available data provide some free access to childcare (see Figure 6). However, in 16 countries the access does not start until the child is 3 years of age, while in another six countries it starts even later. Only Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania, Norway and Slovenia provide free access for children under 3. The hours of access are more compatible with parents who work part-time as the average entitlement is 25 hours weekly. Only Greece and Czechia provide free access of at least 40 hours weekly.

FIGURE 6: Most countries provide part-time childcare access from the age of 3  
Number of hours per week and ages at which children have free entitlement to ECEC (2018)



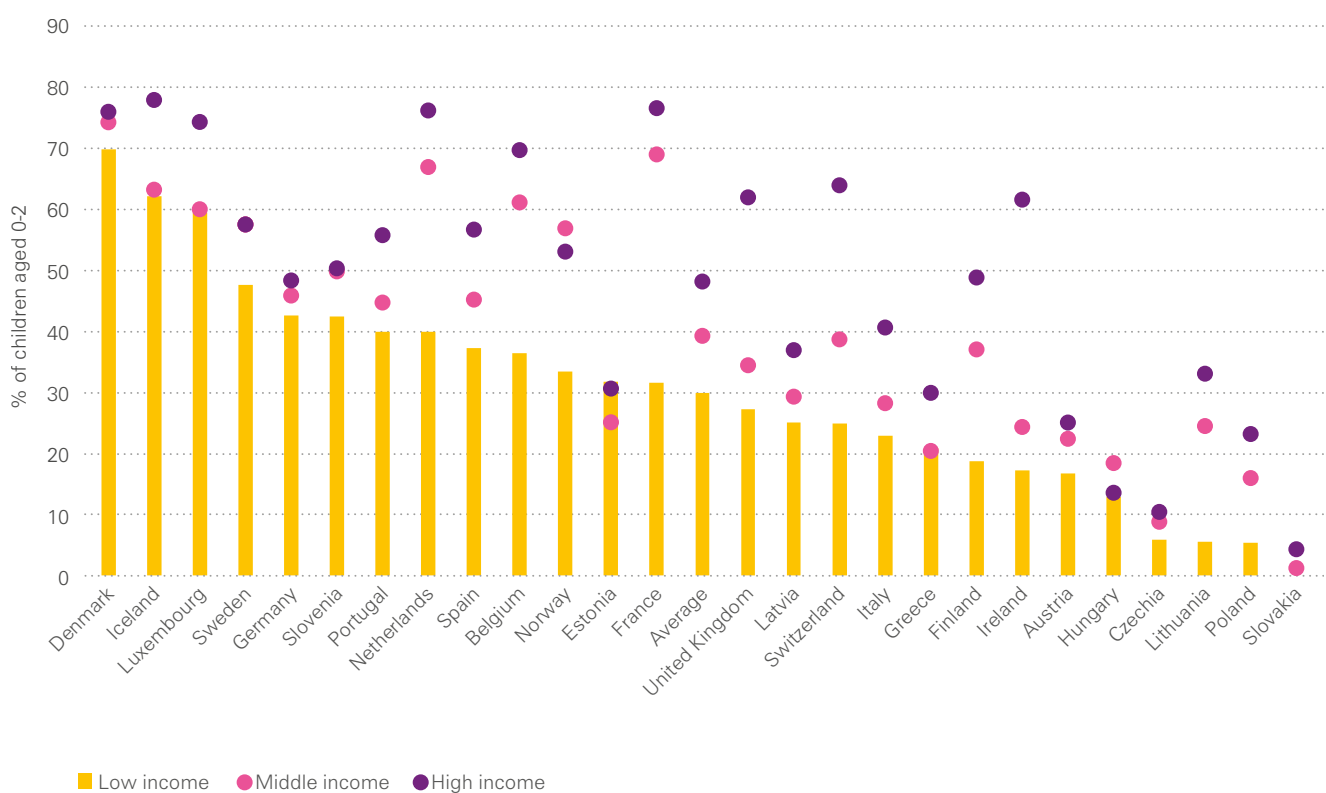
**Note:** For countries with an hour range, the average was calculated: Czechia (32.5–60 hours), England (15–32 hours), Italy (25–50 hours), the Republic of Korea (20–25 hours), Slovenia (30–45 hours), Switzerland (10–20 hours). This chart reports conditional access when data on unconditional access are unavailable. In some countries with unconditional access, some families are eligible for extra hours. For example, in Australia, families may be eligible for additional assistance under the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) equal to the actual fee charged for up to 50 hours per week on average.

**Source:** OECD (2020).

Some parents need more childcare than the amount provided by the state and so enrol children at their own expense. In high-income households, almost a half of children (48 per cent) under 3 attend early child education and care (ECEC). The number goes down to 39 per cent for middle-income households and to 30 per cent for low-income households (see Figure 7). For children aged between 3 and 5 the overall enrolment increases and the income gap narrows: 93 per cent of children from high-income households, 90 per cent of children from middle-income households and 83 per cent of children from low-income households use such services.

FIGURE 7: High-income households are twice as likely to use formal care for children under 3

Participation rates in early childhood education and care of children under 3, by income level, in 2017



Source: OECD (2020).

## Quality

Due to the lack of comparable data, the quality of childcare is measured in this report through the inputs, such as children-to-staff ratio and caregivers' qualifications.<sup>14</sup> Figure 8 shows both children-to-staff ratio and minimal teachers' qualifications in pre-primary programmes in 2018. Low ratios and small groups enable every child to get enough attention from the caregiver, which enhances their safety and development.

In rich countries, an average pre-primary teacher looks after 14 children – almost twice as many as in early childhood programmes for younger children where it stands at six. The ratio ranges from five children per teacher in Iceland to 24 children per teacher in Mexico. Concurrently, in 21 countries the ratio fell between 2005 and 2018 reflecting rising standards or falling fertility rates that allowed for formation of smaller groups.

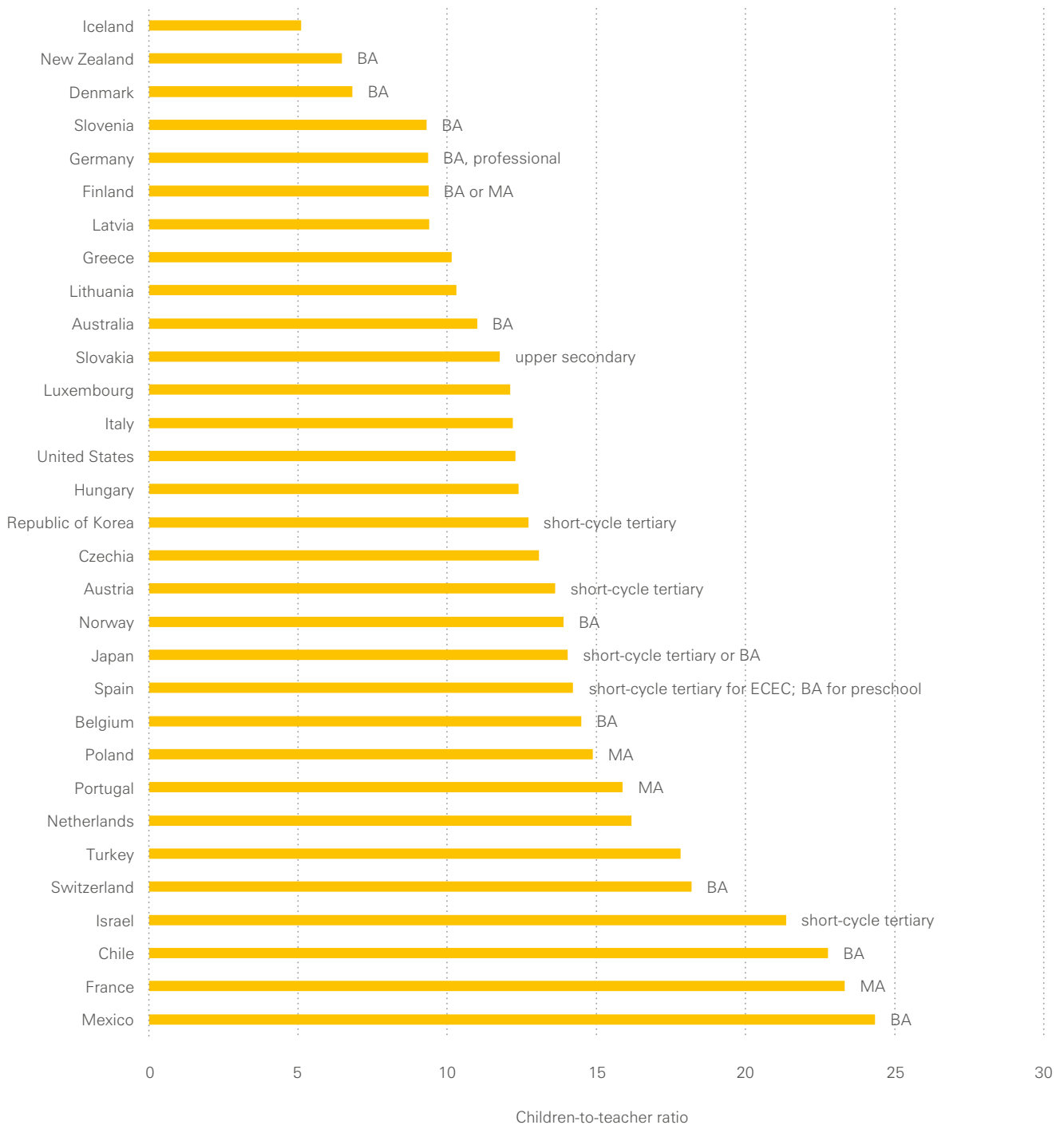
Minimal qualifications for caregivers are usually lower for younger children. Only one third of European countries with available data require staff working with children under 3 to have at least a BA diploma but already three quarters of countries do so for working with children over 3 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). More qualifications are required when working with older children: among 19 rich countries with available data, 15 require preschool teachers to have at least a BA diploma with four countries asking for an MA diploma.

In 2019, the European Council recognized that “in many countries the [childcare] profession has a rather low profile and status”, which stands contrary to what is needed to provide high-quality childcare: complex skills and an understanding of child development.<sup>15</sup> This account is supported by caregivers. In 13 countries with available data, less than a half of caregivers feel that their work is valued by the society: ranging from only 31 per cent in Japan, 33 per cent in Iceland, 36 per cent in Germany, 56 per cent in Israel, 58 per cent in Norway and 61 per cent in Denmark (OECD, 2018). Public perception of childcare work matters as, along with work conditions, it influences who applies and stays in the profession, which translates into quality of childcare.

14 Other indicators of quality could include (a) the system design and organization of services, including accreditation and health and safety regulations; (b) practice within ECEC settings, including interactions and relationships, the role of play and the integration of care and education; (c) child outcomes, including the child's social, emotional, mental, physical skills and benefits to family and community; and (d) other outcomes, such as parents' satisfaction with organized childcare. In selecting indicators, this report does not include children's developmental outcomes. This is due to a lack of internationally comparable data. To date, few countries collect such numbers. One example is Australia that measures early childhood development through the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Such data collections are a key resource for assessing what works well and what needs to be improved in respect to preschool policies for children and their families.

15 Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

FIGURE 8: In pre-primary contexts, 1 teacher looks after 14 children  
 Children-to-teacher ratio and teachers' minimal qualifications in pre-primary in 2018



**Note:** Teachers' minimal qualifications stand for: MA (master's degree), BA (bachelor's degree). The ratio refers to teachers only (teaching aides excluded). Pre-primary refers to organized learning one, two or three years before the official age of entering primary school. In most rich countries, pre-primary starts at the age of 3 (with Australia, Canada, Switzerland setting the age at 4) and lasts until the start of primary school, which in most rich countries means the age of 6 (with a few countries setting the age at 5 or 7).<sup>16</sup>

**Source:** OECD (2020). For Australia: National Quality Framework of the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. The ratio 11:1 applies in the majority of the Australian states and territories (ACT, NT, QLD, SA, VIC). For teacher's qualifications, see: [www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/requirements/children-preschool-age-or-under](http://www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/requirements/children-preschool-age-or-under).

<sup>16</sup> Based on Table A. A1 of OECD, 2020.

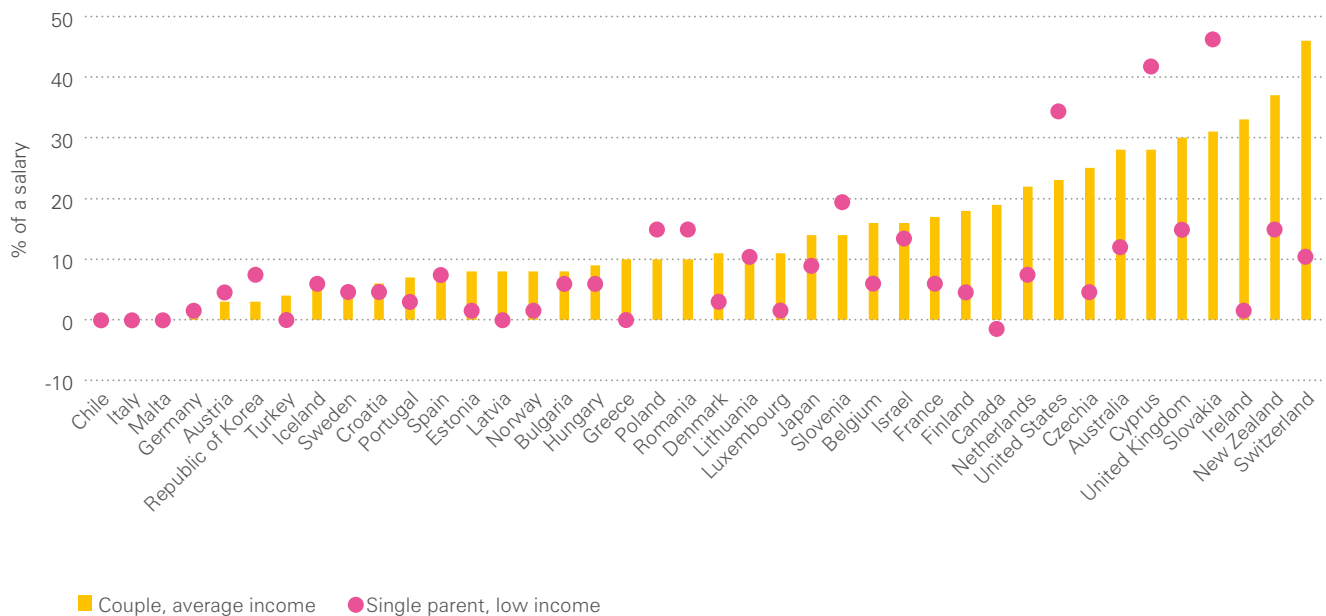
## Affordability

The high cost of childcare accentuates socioeconomic inequalities and deters women from returning to work. Among parents who used organized childcare in Europe, 38 per cent found its cost difficult to cover. Another 15 per cent of parents would like to use day care but cannot do so. The proportion ranges from 2 per cent in Bulgaria to 33 per cent in Spain. The main obstacles include affordability (6.5 per cent) and availability of places (2.2 per cent). Negligible proportion of parents quote concerns about quality (0.3 per cent), opening hours (0.6 per cent) and geographical distance to the day care (0.6 per cent) as the reason of unmet need. Low-income families voice more affordability concerns. For example, in Spain, 22 per cent of low-income families and 5 per cent of high-income families would like to make more use of childcare but do not do so because of money. However, income gaps do not impact such views in Sweden, Denmark and Estonia due to the government subsidies.<sup>17</sup>

In 2020, a couple of two average earners would need to spend 14 per cent of one wage to keep two children in childcare. The spending would range from nothing, due to free childcare (Chile, Malta and Italy) to Ireland, New Zealand and Switzerland where a couple would need to spend between a third and a half of the average wage (see Figure 9). Due to recent reforms, especially the new 30 hours of free access and the disadvantaged two-year-olds offer, the cost of childcare for such a couple in the United Kingdom fell from 44 per cent in 2015 to 30 per cent in 2020. Still, the country remains one of the five countries with the most expensive childcare services.

FIGURE 9: In eight countries, childcare consumes at least a quarter of the average wage

Childcare costs for two children in full-time care, by family type and income, 2020



**Note:** Low income is defined as two thirds of the national average wage. The graph presents a proportion of one salary spend on childcare: for a couple with average income, it is expressed as a percentage of one average wage, for a single parent of low income it is expressed as a percentage of two thirds of the average wage. The graph presents the net costs paid by parents for full-time centre-based childcare for two children aged 2 and 3 after government subsidies and any benefits designed to reduce the gross childcare fees. Data refer to 2020 except Republic of Korea (2019), New Zealand (2018), Chile (2015). When cost varies across regions or municipalities, region-specific fees and policy settings are used (usually ones applicable in the capital city).

**Source:** OECD Stats (2020).

<sup>17</sup> All numbers in this paragraph taken from the European Quality of Life Surveys (2016).

Most rich countries heavily subsidize childcare for disadvantaged groups. In 19 rich countries, a single parent of low earnings would pay less than 5 per cent of their wage on childcare for two children full time. Still, in the United States, Cyprus and Slovakia, such a parent would need to spend between a third and a half of their salary.

Since the data above were collected, some rich countries have adapted their childcare policies. In 2019, Germany committed €5.5 billion to improve the quality and affordability of day care, for example through exempting low-income families from daycare contributions (Federal Ministry, 2019). In 2021, the Parliament adopted an act to reinforce the inclusion of children in ECEC, for example by mandating that children with and without disabilities should be cared for together. In 2021, the United States expanded childcare policies by providing US\$15 billion in emergency relief to states through the Child Care and Development Block Grant and US\$24 billion through childcare stabilization grants (US Department of the Treasury, 2021).

In 2021, Australia made a Aus\$2 billion commitment over four years to strengthen preschool attendance and Aus\$1.7 billion to make childcare more affordable for families with two or more children in childcare (Australian Government, 2021). Starting from July 2022, Child Care Subsidy (CCS) will increase by 30 per cent for the second child and subsequent children aged 5 years and under in care.

Rich countries are also encouraged to consider programmes servicing remote areas and ensuring access to early learning for First Nations children. A model achieving substantial social impact is the Indi Kindi programme, a multisectoral early years program in two Indigenous communities in northern Australia.<sup>18</sup>

## Childcare policy mix

By contrast to previous subsections that used the objectified measurements of quality and affordability, this subsection looks at parents' subjective perceptions: expressed satisfaction with childcare and feeling that they are struggling with childcare costs.

In reality, any parent's assessment of their satisfaction with the childcare available to them would take into account access, affordability and quality jointly (*see Figure 10*). Results do show that parents are more satisfied with childcare in countries with affordable prices. Enrolment follows both affordability and good opinion of care services.

### Country codes utilized in Figures 10 and 11

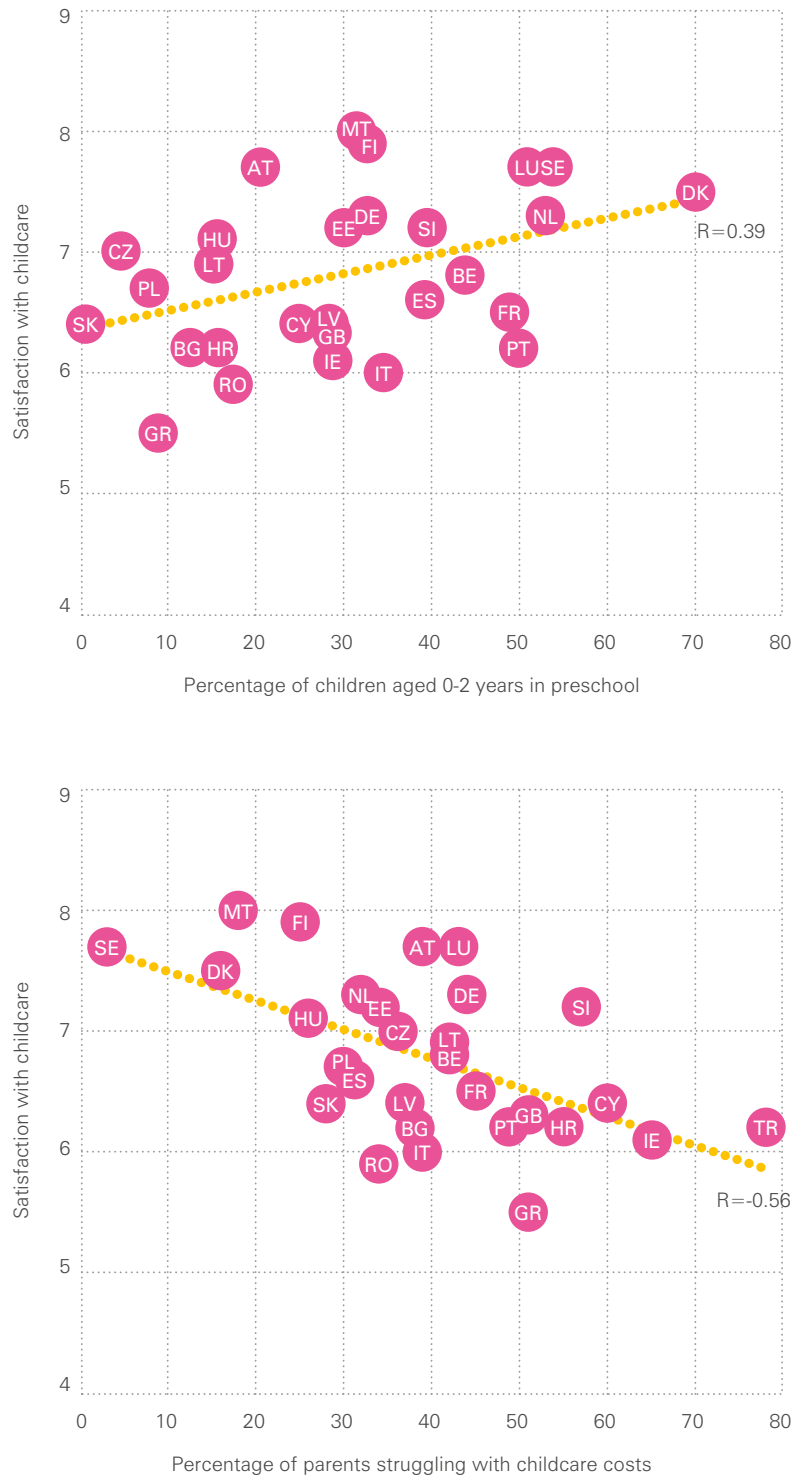
Australia	AU	Cyprus	CY	Greece	GR	Latvia	LV	Norway	NO	Spain	ES
Austria	AT	Czechia	CZ	Hungary	HU	Lithuania	LT	Poland	PL	Sweden	SE
Belgium	BE	Denmark	DK	Iceland	IS	Luxembourg	LU	Portugal	PT	Switzerland	CH
Bulgaria	BG	Estonia	EE	Ireland	IE	Malta	MT	Republic of Korea	KR	Turkey	TR
Canada	CA	Finland	FI	Israel	IL	Mexico	MX	Romania	RO	United Kingdom	GB
Chile	CL	France	FR	Italy	IT	Netherlands	NL	Slovakia	SK	United States	US
Croatia	HR	Germany	DE	Japan	JP	New Zealand	NZ	Slovenia	SI		

<sup>18</sup> Barhava report Barhava-Report\_Indi-Kindi-Impact-2020.pdf (<https://www.moriartyfoundation.org.au/>)



FIGURE 10: Countries with high childcare satisfaction have high enrolment and affordable prices

Satisfaction with childcare mapped against enrolment and affordability



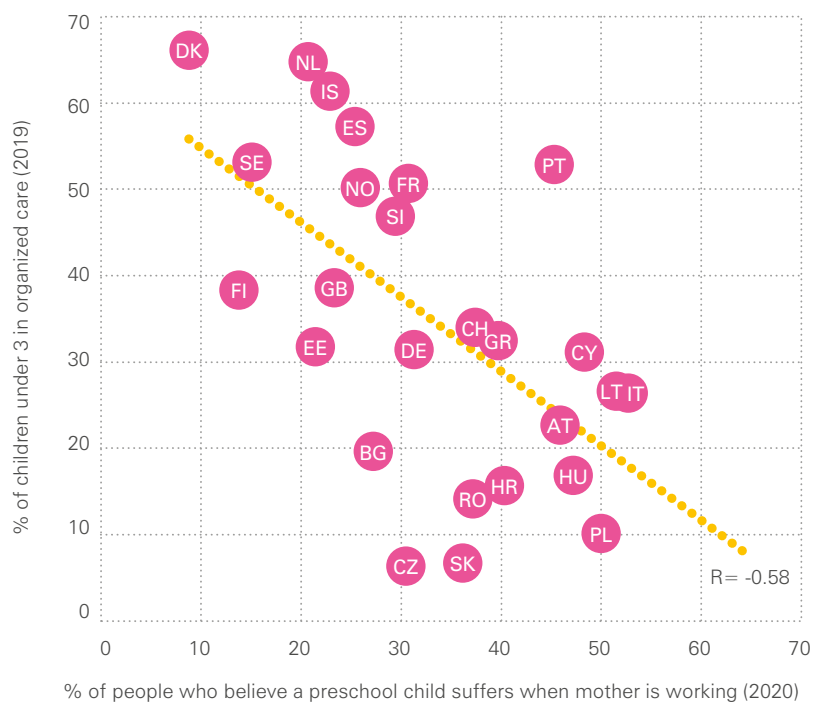
**Notes:** Satisfaction with childcare (scale 0–10) and struggling with childcare costs asked only to parents of a child who has received formal childcare in the past 12 months.

**Source:** Satisfaction and struggling with cost: EQLS (2016); enrolment: Eurostat (2018).

Yet, enrolment and unmet needs do not necessarily go together. In Denmark, where 70 per cent of children under 3 years of age attend organized childcare, 6 per cent of parents have unmet childcare needs. This is almost the same percentage as in Czechia, where only 5 per cent of children attend organized childcare – meaning that many families are not looking for organized care. Across the European countries, about a half of parents of children under 3 reported no need for childcare. These differences will, in part, reflect cultural differences in childcare styles. Parental preferences, cultural norms and the availability of family members to provide informal care account for some of the differences across countries in enrolment rates for children under the age of 3. At the country level, cultural views about childcare are strongly related ( $r = -0.58$ ) to enrolment of children under 3 (see Figure 11) but weakly related to enrolment of those aged 3 to 5 ( $r = -0.27$ ).

FIGURE 11: Cultural views about children’s needs relate to enrolment but only for children under 3

% of children under 3 enrolled in ECEC and % of people who believe a preschool child suffers when mother is working



**Note:** % of people who believe a preschool child suffers when mother is working is a sum of responses ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’.  
**Source:** Eurostat (2019) and World Value Survey wave 7 (2017-2020).

## Childcare in the times of COVID-19

During the pandemic, more than 80 countries introduced some type of lockdown, which affected 6 out of 10 children in the world (Gromada et al., 2020). Such restrictions inevitably impacted childcare: many formal providers have closed temporarily, while some informal providers, such as grandparents, became unavailable. Working parents struggled to balance family and work life, with a higher toll placed on women.

In the US, women's labour participation hit a 33-year low in January 2021. A third out of 2.3 million women who have dropped out of work quoted childcare problems as the reason.<sup>19</sup> Mothers of children under 13 were three times more likely than fathers to lose jobs.<sup>20</sup>

Rich countries have mobilized a historic amount of funding to offset the effects of COVID-19: 8 per cent of their GDP during the first wave. Yet, only 2 per cent of this funding was earmarked for child-specific social policies (for details of calculations, see Richardson et al., 2020). An even smaller fraction was reserved for childcare.

In the first half of 2020, 12 rich countries introduced childcare-specific policies to mitigate the impact of the crisis on families with children (see *Table 1*). They included childcare benefits (Canada, Italy, Republic of Korea, Poland), paid leave (Greece, Hungary, Norway, Romania) or simpler procedures to access childcare benefits (Austria). Australia offered free child care to one million families by offering 13,400 childcare services a half of their fee revenue if they remained open and did not charge families for care which kept 99% of services open and providing care during May 2020<sup>21</sup>. Supplementary income could be claimed for 200,000 caregivers under the JobKeeper payment estimated at Aus\$1 billion for the childcare sector.<sup>22</sup> The United States introduced the first federally mandated paid parental leave: the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of March 2020 (H.R.6201) offered up to 12 weeks of leave to some workers whose children's schools and daycare centres had closed, a good first step toward implementing lasting policies.

Some employers have also joined the efforts to help caregivers balance work and family responsibilities in response to the pandemic. For example, in 2021, a number of major Australian firms signed up to support Family Friendly Workplaces, launched by UNICEF Australia and Parents At Work. Workplaces can now be supported to improve their offering to working parents and be certified against a set of National Work + Family Standards. The standards cover flexible work; parental leave; family wellbeing; and family care.<sup>23</sup>

19 Bureau of Labor Statistics and Census Bureau and Federal Reserve (2021).

20 Refers to the period between February and August 2020. Pew Research Centre quoted by Time, 2021.

21 <https://www.dese.gov.au/early-childhood/resources/early-childhood-education-and-care-relief-package-four-week-review>

22 The Australian Government's Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package ran from 6 April to 12 July 2020. It provided approximately 50 per cent of the sector's fee revenue or 50 per cent of the existing hour rate cap, whichever was lower (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020).

23 See: <https://familyfriendlyworkplaces.com/>

TABLE 1: Childcare policy responses introduced in the first wave of the pandemic

Country	Social Protection Category / Expansion of existing policy (Yes/No)	Who is eligible?	Payment details	National or local policy (N/L)	One-off, Temporary, or Permanent (O/T/P)
Australia	Childcare payment to the sector (SA) (No)	One million children. Priority given to working parents, vulnerable and disadvantaged children and parents with pre-existing enrolments	The Government paid 50 per cent of the childcare sector's revenue for services that remained open. Childcare was provided for families free of charge.	N	T
Austria	Childcare benefit (SA) (No)	Women from pregnancy until child is aged 5	Temporary waiving of conditionalities to receive the childcare benefit	N	T
	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	Employees with care responsibilities for one or more children under the age of 14	3 weeks of care leave	N	T
Canada	Increase in childcare benefits (SA) (Yes)	Existing childcare recipients	Can\$500 for up to 26 weeks for reducing work hours for care of under 12s		
Finland	Paid leave (SI) (No)	Employees, childcare providers, people placed in quarantine	Sickness allowance	N	T
Greece	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	(i) Public sector workers w/ children; (ii) businesses; (iii) Private sector workers w/children	(i) special leave or part-time work without deduction from pay; (ii) Temporary rotational work scheme was introduced; (iii) Eligibility for special purpose paid leave	N	
Hungary	Maternity leave (SI) (No)		Extended expiring benefits	N	T
Italy	Childcare benefit (SA) (No)	Families and Workers	€1200 (€2000 for health workers) for a babysitter/ grandparent	N	O
	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	Parents of children younger than 12	50% wage up to 15 days	N	T
Korea, Republic of	Childcare benefit (SA) (No)	Parent employees	50,000 KRW per day	N	T
Norway	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	Workers	20 care days leave per child (doubled)		
Poland	Childcare benefit (SA) (Yes)	Parents with children up to age 8	Parents have an additional 14 days of childcare allowance	N	T
Romania	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	Parents with children up to age 12		N	T
United States	Paid childcare leave (SI) (No)	Parents whose children's schools are closed	US\$511 per day for 2 weeks and US\$200 per day for 12 weeks	N	T

**Note:** First wave defined as the period 1 February 2020 to 31 July 2020. Countries that introduced childcare policy responses during subsequent COVID-19 waves are not covered (e.g., in 2021, Germany extended child sickness benefit to support working parents during the pandemic). Social protection categories: SA: social assistance; SI: social insurance.

**Source:** Richardson et al. (2020) based on Gentilini et al. (2020), IMF (2020), UNESCO (2020) and the Australian Government Department Education, Skills and Employment (2021) [www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare](http://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare)

## Recommendations

This report reviewed childcare policies in 41 countries that are part of OECD or the EU using eight indicators to measure leave for parents as well as access, quality and affordability of childcare. Despite the role that childcare policies play in development for children and work–life balance for adults, some of the world’s richest countries fail to offer comprehensive solutions to all families. They can improve their policies as follows:

1. Provide a suitable mix of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave for mothers and fathers in the prenatal period and in the first year of a child’s life, to ensure that parents can spend time caring for and bonding with their child.
2. Leave should be gender-sensitive, yet gender-equitable, to ensure neither parent is overburdened with home care, which can accentuate various gender inequalities. This would mean bringing fathers’ individual leave rights in line with mothers’ and ensuring that both parents can take advantage of parental leave policies equally.
3. Leave should be inclusive and granted not only to full-time employees but also those in non-standard forms of employment or training (e.g., part-time, self-employed, informal workers, students) and support the costs related to birth and parental care during infancy for those in other life circumstances (such as the uninsured or under-insured, the unemployed, recent migrants).
4. Align the end of parental leave with availability of childcare to ensure there are no gaps in the provision of support for infant care as parents look to return to work.
5. Make accessible, flexible and affordable quality childcare available to all parents. Such access will allow families to realize their preference between earning, using informal childcare and using organized childcare.
6. Publicly provided and regulated childcare can facilitate access for low-income families, as well as ensure standards in provision. Fee systems, ranging from free to a nominal charge for wealthier parents, will allow public providers to recoup some costs of provision, as well as limit unintended effects on earnings inequality.
7. Invest in the childcare workforce, their qualifications and their working conditions, to encourage the highest possible standards. Low children-to-staff ratio should enhance quality by ensuring that each child gets enough attention from qualified personnel. Implement National Quality Frameworks for Childcare services to regulate and maintain standards.
8. Encourage employers to support working parents through inclusive and gender-sensitive paid leave entitlements, flexible work arrangements (e.g., flexible hours, compressed, reduced overall and staggered time) and childcare support systems. All measures should be based on regular consultations with working parents, with special attention paid to single parents and those most in need (see, for example, UNICEF, ILO and UN Women, 2020).
9. Provide leave policies and childcare services with family policies, such as universal child benefits, to strengthen the child policy portfolio and reduce the risk of social inequalities being replicated in public childcare settings.

## Appendix: indicators used in the League Table

Country	Job-protected leave		Quality		Enrolment		Affordability	
	Mothers' full-rate equivalent (weeks), 2018	Fathers' full-rate equivalent (weeks), 2018	Children-to-staff ratio, 2018	Minimum teachers' qualification, 2018	Enrolment of children under 3, 2019	Organized learning one year before school, 2018	Two-earner couple, average earnings, 2020	Single parent, low earnings, 2020
Australia	7,7	0,9	11,0	BA	35,8	86,2	28,0	11,9
Austria	49,4	6,6	13,6	SC tertiary	22,7	99,8	3,0	4,5
Belgium	13,1	5,0	14,5	BA	55,5	97,7	16,0	6,0
Bulgaria	69,7	1,9			19,6	80,5	8,0	6,0
Canada	26,6	2,7				97,0	19,0	-1,5
Chile	30,0	1,0	22,8	BA		91,9	0,0	0,0
Croatia	40,9	3,6			15,6	94,9	6,0	4,5
Cyprus	13,5	1,5			31,1	98,3	28,0	41,8
Czechia	46,9	0,6	13,1		6,3	90,0	25,0	4,5
Denmark	26,5	1,1	6,8	BA	66,1	98,0	11,0	3,0
Estonia	84,4	2,0		BA	31,8	88,4	8,0	1,5
Finland	40,4	5,7	9,4	BA or MA	38,3	97,4	18,0	4,5
France	18,0	5,4	23,3	MA	50,7	99,8	17,0	6,0
Germany	42,6	5,7	9,4	BA, professional	31,4	98,8	1,0	1,5
Greece	21,3	0,4	10,2		32,4	94,7	10,0	0,0
Hungary	68,2	1,0	12,4		16,9	86,9	9,0	6,0
Iceland	17,7	8,9	5,1		61,3	96,6	5,0	6,0
Ireland	6,9	0,5			40,8	99,0	33,0	1,5
Israel	15,0	0,0	21,4	SC tertiary		99,7	16,0	13,4
Italy	25,2	0,8	12,2		26,3	93,4	0,0	0,0
Japan	35,8	30,4	14,0	SC tertiary or BA		91,1	14,0	9,0
Latvia	51,6	1,1	9,4		28,3	97,7	8,0	0,0



Lithuania	62,0	4,0	10,3	BA	26,6	97,2	11,0	10,4
Luxembourg	31,6	13,6	12,1		60,0	99,2	11,0	1,5
Malta	15,5	0,2			38,3	98,7	0,0	0,0
Mexico	12,0	1,0	24,3	BA		99,1		0,0
Netherlands	16,0	0,4	16,2		64,8	99,3	22,0	7,5
New Zealand	8,4	0,0	6,5	BA		93,8	37,0	14,9
Norway	43,0	9,4	13,9	BA	50,1	97,0	8,0	1,5
Poland	41,6	2,0	14,9	MA	10,1	95,4	10,0	14,9
Portugal	20,4	12,5	15,9	MA	52,9	94,2	7,0	3,0
Republic of Korea	25,1	15,4	12,7	SC tertiary		98,6	3,0	7,5
Romania	92,4	4,7			14,1	82,2	10,0	14,9
Slovakia	53,1	0,0	11,8	upper secondary	6,7	84,0	31,0	46,3
Slovenia	48,4	3,9	9,3	BA	46,9	94,3	14,0	19,4
Spain	16,0	4,3	14,2	SC tertiary for ECEC; BA for preschool	57,3	94,9	7,0	7,5
Sweden	34,6	10,8		BA	53,1	99,7	5,0	4,5
Switzerland	8,2	0,0	18,2	BA	33,9	99,9	46,0	10,4
Turkey	10,7	1,0	17,8			75,7	4,0	0,0
United Kingdom	11,7	0,4			38,6	100,0	30,0	14,9
United States	0,0	0,0	12,3			90,0	23,0	34,3

**Note:** Teachers' minimal qualifications stand for: MA (master's degree), BA (bachelor's degree), SC tertiary (short-cycle tertiary). Minimal teachers' qualifications were recalculated into numerical values as follows: ISCED 3 = upper secondary education; ISCED 5 = short-cycle tertiary; ISCED 6 = bachelor's degree or equivalent; ISCED 7 = master's degree or equivalent. Affordability figures are expressed as a percentage of one average wage (for a couple) and two thirds of the average wage (for a single parent) and refer to 2020 except Republic of Korea (2019), New Zealand (2018) and Chile (2015). Low income was defined as two thirds of the national average wage.

**Sources:** Job-protected leave: OECD Family Database [www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm) (apart from Canada: authors' calculations reflecting the extension to Employment Insurance shared Parental benefits in 2019<sup>24</sup>, applying a net replacement rate of 53.2% of average wage). Children-to-staff ratio and teachers' qualifications: OECD Education at a Glance (2020) (apart from Australia: data taken from the government source: [www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care](http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care)). Enrolment of children under 3: Eurostat based on EU-SILC 2019. Organized learning 1 year before school (SDG) <http://data.uis.unesco.org>, data for 2018 apart from Canada (source: Canada Statistics Office for 2016/17) and Japan (taken for 2013 from Innocenti Report Card 15). Affordability for a single parent of low income: own calculations based on the OECD Stats ([stats.oecd.org](https://stats.oecd.org)).

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for every child, answers

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