

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening the importance of *SPACE* and
EDUCARE approach in early childhood systems



About the project

The EDUCAS project (*Space and Educare: Creating child and family-friendly learning spaces in ECEC centers – Erasmus+ KA2*) aimed at creating Early Childhood Education and Care environments that holistically support children's development, respect the diverse needs of children and families, with particular attention to the ones at risk of social exclusion.

The project addressed the *educare* approach, which focuses on using data in services, creating professional development for staff, high-quality teaching practices, and family engagement. Hence, children from birth to age five are safe, healthy, and eager to learn.

The project was implemented in three countries ([Belgium](#), [Italy](#), [Lithuania](#)) through the collaboration between research centers and ECEC services. In each country, one research center and two ECEC centers have been involved. International Step by Step Association participated in the development of the main project documents, and additionally was responsible for communication and dissemination of the project results.

All project partners worked together to rethink ECEC spaces within an *educare* approach.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has rightly gained a prominent place on national and international policy agendas. In recent years a broad global consensus has emerged that ensuring access to high-quality ECEC is one of the most effective policy tools countries can employ to impact both individual and collective (i.e., national) wellbeing and educational achievement.

The Council Conclusions on "Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion," in Statement 5, stress that "the early years of a child's development are critical in shaping children's health, learning, behaviour, social inclusion and they influence their entire life course. In this context, early childhood development policies and services are among the critical tools for preventing and tackling poverty and social exclusion, breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, and promoting social mobility."¹

Design of the ECEC systems, governance, financing and delivery mode of ECEC services dramatically differentiates children's and their families lives. High-quality care experiences and interactions with significant caregivers/educators and the environment in the early years affect all aspects of child development.

Different longitudinal studies demonstrate that participation in high-quality ECEC programmes has a long-lasting impact on educational outcomes and attainment and overall social, emotional, and physical development for children and their families. These benefits are even more substantial for societally disadvantaged children and families. Several studies² show that high-quality ECEC experiences can be especially beneficial for children with a migrant background, particularly those who speak a minority language at home and children living in poverty. For the future and the here and now, high-quality ECEC

¹ Council Conclusions (2018). Integrated early childhood development policies as a tool for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion - <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10306-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

² Vandenbroeck, M. & Lazzari, A. (2013), Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children from ethnic minority and low income families. Report draft for the Transatlantic Forum for Inclusive Early Years (TFIEY). Ghent meeting, Jan. 2013.

supports the holistic development of young children and offers them a safe and stimulating environment as a first encounter with the world outside the family. It also provides them a social space in which they can engage with their peers. Parents can benefit as well: ECEC provision can be their partner in education and offer them support, as they are their child's first educators. ECEC can also serve as a meeting place for parents to engage with their peers and exchange their experiences and concerns.³

QUALITY OF ECEC SERVICES ENTAILS INSEPARABILITY OF CARE AND EDUCATION

At the root of many issues that hold back developing a coherent approach to ECEC is the persistent division between education and care. A unified approach, with the equal status given to 'care' and 'education', has been proven to change attitudes and foster a whole-child approach across ECEC centres.

ECEC should provide children with the best possible care and education and promote good quality conditions for growth. We know from research and practice that caring tasks are also educational and that care is intrinsic to quality education.⁴ The routine moments (eating, hygiene, sleeping) and spaces should not be less important than the playing moments or the more structured activities. Children develop caring, relational, cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of their identity during daily routines, which means that specific attention should be reserved for these moments and the spaces where they happen. Taking care of the spaces in which the 'routine' moments happen is crucial for the wellbeing and learning of children and adults. 'Caring' spaces, such as the bathroom, sleeping or eating moments, are also significant opportunities for the discovery and learning of children.

The importance of the inseparability of education, care and playing is stressed in many international policy documents. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) declares that it is the duty of governments to provide appropriate assistance for families and provisions for the care and education of young children. In the recommendations of the Council of European Union on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care systems,⁵ it is stated that 'provision of high-quality services is best designed when it is based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable, that childhood is a value in itself and that children should not only be prepared for school and adulthood but also be supported and appreciated in their early years'. The European Quality Framework for ECEC⁶ also underlines that ECEC quality should be linked to a holistic approach to child's development in which education and care are intertwined.

³ Rayna, S., Rubio, M. N. (2010). *Coéduquer, participer, faire alliance*, in Rayna S., Rubio M. N., Scheu H. (Eds.), *Parents-professionnels: la coéducation en questions*, Erès, Toulouse, 15-25

⁴ Van Laere, K., Peeters, J., Vandebroek, M. 'The Education and Care Divide: the role of the early childhood workforce in 15 European countries', *European Journal of Education*, 47, 4, 527-541, 2012.

⁵ Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*. Retrieved from: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019Ho605\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019Ho605(01)&from=EN)

⁶ Council of the European Union (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems*. Retrieved from: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019Ho605\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019Ho605(01)&from=EN)

Nevertheless, at the European level, there is a general trend to treat children as 'academic learners' at younger ages.⁷ A hierarchy between care and education often exists, in line with the concept of 'schoolification' of ECEC. As shown in a recent NESET report,⁸ in several EU countries, short-term qualified assistants take care of the physical needs of children, while core practitioners are there to 'educate' children and focus on cognitive activities. When significant caring interactions are considered the responsibility of short-term-qualified assistants, this implicitly indicates that care is valued less than cognitive development, in line with a traditional approach that doesn't fully recognize the crucial role of 'care' in the upbringing of children.

IMPORTANCE OF THE *EDUCARE* APPROACH

Educare is a holistic way of working with children, in which wellbeing, learning, and playing are seen as inseparable and equally important. It is more than the simple assurance that children feel emotionally and physically well within the ECEC setting. It also represents belonging and creating an inclusive environment for a diversity of children.⁹ *Educare* implies addressing the needs of children and their rights in a holistic way,¹⁰ and thus a way to put inseparability of education and care into practice. An *educare* approach is a participatory and inclusive one, in which child's participation and partnership with families are crucial.

For working within an *educare* approach, the organization of ECEC spaces, infrastructures, and materials is essential.

FROM THE *EDUCAS* PROJECT TO EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS for strengthening the importance of *SPACE* and *EDUCARE* approach in early childhood systems are based on the findings and insights from the *EDUCAS* project implemented in Belgium (FI), Italy, and Lithuania, the extensive literature review, country policy recommendations, and other international documents developed by project partners.¹¹

Educating and caring for young children is a big responsibility, challenge and commitment. The text that follows aims at providing a comprehensive set of recommendations for policymakers on EU and national levels, funders, and other stakeholders.

Rationale 1. In existing split ECEC systems, services for younger children (from birth to age three) usually tend to focus more on caring tasks. In contrast, older children (children aged three to compulsory school age)

⁷ Moss, P. (2013). *The relationship between early childhood and compulsory education: a properly political question*. In *Early Childhood and Compulsory Education: Reconceptualising the relationship*, edited by P. Moss, 2-50. London: Routledge.

⁸ Peeters, J.; Sharmahd, J.; Budginaitė I., 'Professionalisation of Childcare Assistants in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Pathways towards Qualification', NESET II report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016. doi: 10.2766/898530

⁹ Van der Mespel, S., Brazinha, M., Hulpia, H., Jensen, B., Marquard, M., Režek, M., Sousa, J. (2020). *VALUE Roadmap. Pathways towards strengthening collaboration in early childhood education and care*. Belgium: VBJK.

¹⁰ Van Laere, K., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016). The (in) convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on *educare*. *Early Years*, 38(1), 4-18.

¹¹ For more information: [EDUCAS webpage](#) There you find also a Toolbox for ECEC professionals, country policy recommendations and the case studies of each country.

are considered to attend 'early education' services. Therefore, the policy initiatives undertaken for quality improvement might tend to focus more on pre-academic learning and school readiness than on supporting children's holistic development according to their natural learning strategies. The unequal status that is given to 'care' and 'education' does not ensure an uninterrupted journey towards a child's optimal development.

Recommendations:

- Support and promote the National Reforms on the Integrated/Unified System of ECEC from birth to six years, emphasizing the educational value of 0-3 services and the need for a holistic approach that integrates care and learning across a continuum from birth to compulsory school age (birth to age six).
- Invest in policies that support integrated/unified ECEC systems and continuity between regulations of different services for children when the system is split. Unitary and collaborative systems lead to better-quality and more equitable provision and result in greater financial efficiency. Sharing responsibilities between the central government and local authorities improves how local needs are taken into account.¹²
- Implement research-based long-term ECEC strategies to ensure sustainable quality.
- To improve quality of services in split ECEC systems, strengthen social inclusion, and embrace diversity, dedicate sufficient attention to institutional transitions between different levels of the same system (e.g., childcare and preschool; preschool and primary school) and across different systems. Support and strengthen collaboration amongst departments and authorities responsible for care and education, facilitate linkage and continuity between services, integrate education and care, and synchronize a coherent policy framework for regulation, funding, training, and service delivery across the daycare/childcare systems, and preschool programmes.
- Foster cooperation and coordination between different levels of governance (local, regional, national) and different ECEC sectors to deal proactively with the artificial institutional split. Enable an equal partnership between childcare services for the youngest and preschool provision for the older children. Complementarity and continuity in child curricula should be central (in contrast to curricula built solely upon a vertical hierarchy of learning outcomes for what comes next).¹³
- Foster and promote alignment between care and education-specific goals and regulations, between safety regulations and pedagogical vision in policy documents. Regulations and pedagogical vision should be intertwined and should support and not hinder each other (e.g., applying a 'risky pedagogy,' allowing children to climb trees, experimenting, cutting with knives, etc., in ECEC spaces within the safety regulations). Policy makers, pedagogical coaches, inspection staff, ECEC professionals, children, and parents should create moments to dialogue and find solutions that will enhance child development.

Rationale 2. The European ECEC Quality Framework emphasizes the importance of creating a curriculum for the whole preschool period (from birth to compulsory schooling age), providing direction for pedagogical work across the entire 0-6 age range. It emphasizes the importance and inseparability of learning, caring, and upbringing, the view of early childhood education and care as the first stage of the education system and an integral part of lifelong learning. The ECEC Curriculum should be built on a holistic approach to the child and

¹² Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care – Report of the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission. (2014), p. 62.

¹³ For more information on this subject, please check the START project: <http://start.pei.si/>

its family and understand care, education and upbringing as inseparable. ECEC should provide children with suitable pedagogical activities, while care, nurturing, and learning together form a coherent whole.

Recommendations:

- Use the *educare* approach in the development of a research-based curriculum.
- Promote equal importance of care and education approaches and activities throughout the curriculum.
- When designing ECEC spaces, follow a 'less can be more' approach. Budgets for equipping ECEC services should be spent on well-thought materials and equipment that support children's discoveries and create a 'calm' environment where creativity and relationships can grow (e.g., non-structured and natural materials, wooden blocks, recycled essentials, etc.). Spaces should not overstimulate, but rather create a calm environment for children to discover and create.
- Enhance partnership with parents and families and their participation in developing curriculum, organizing space, and making decisions about their children's learning.

Rationale 3. Regular evaluation of practice (internal and external) needs to focus both on assessment (control) and support (supporting professionals to improve their practice). This is primarily due to the need for accountability of public investment in ECEC and the interest in enhancing quality by identifying strengths and weaknesses in ECEC systems. To build a shared understanding of the *educare* approach and its importance for holistic child development, the concept of *educare* has to be explained and integrated into national quality assessment frameworks and any quality monitoring and assessment tool used to assess quality. Shared understanding has to be established on different levels of the ECEC system. All parties involved have to agree that all activities in ECEC have both educational and caring components. Giving equal value to these moments also means valuing the spaces in which they occur, the materials, and the infrastructures.

Recommendations:

- Introduce in the existing National Frameworks for the Quality Assessment and Assurance for ECEC centers areas of quality and specific quality indicators referring to *educare* approach.
- Monitor processes in applying *educare* approach.

Rationale 4. The competent workforce across different sectors and roles plays a crucial part in providing quality ECEC while implementing care and education in an integrated manner. To meet the expectations and deliver high-quality practices, the workforce must be well prepared, supported, and motivated. There is a consensus, endorsed by research, that well educated and well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality ECEC with the most favorable cognitive and social outcomes for children. Therefore, the qualifications and pre-service and in-service training of ECEC staff are essential policy issues¹⁴. International research on the impact of staff working conditions shows a clear link between the staff-to-child ratio, group size, wages, and ECEC quality. The level and quality of preparation and training of early childhood

¹⁴ Starting Strong II (2006). Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD, Paris.

professionals are key factors in determining the overall quality of services offered. Continuous professional development that supports cooperation, individual and group reflection, and mutual learning among practitioners with different initial qualifications ensures ongoing child development throughout the ECEC years. It contributes to the more outstanding professionalism of staff working with both younger and older children.

Recommendations:

- Invest in paid child-free hours to allow moments of individual and team reflection on their work, space, materials, etc., shared CPD opportunities on the *educare* approach for the whole staff, and for working with parents.
- Invest in a favorable child/adult ratio to support an *educare* approach, and ensure that sufficient personnel is available throughout the day (including lunch breaks) to provide children with adequate individual attention and support regarding their caring, playing, and learning needs. Utilize the lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis on decreased adult-child ratio and its benefits for children.
- Introduce the concept of *educare* into the pre-service training of ECEC staff to align their preparation with the expectations from practice. Initial training should support future professionals in understanding that competent educators nurture children's holistic development by giving the same value to caring and learning moments and creating safe and inspiring learning environments.
- In pre-service and in-service training for the ECEC staff include knowledge and skills needed for the *educare* approach, such as welcoming diversity, respecting different family backgrounds, values, and beliefs (particular focus on care and education). Additionally, staff needs to develop transversal skills, including teamwork, dialog, reflection, building relationship with families and children. Staff needs to be able to observe children and practice in general, plan, document recursively and flexibly to capture children's needs and interests, and adapt their practice.
- Starting from the recommendations from the European Quality Framework create opportunities for shared CPD paths for all staff within ECEC centers, especially those traditionally seen as responsible for care and those responsible for education. Participation of different staff categories in shared CPD occasions gives the whole team the possibility of reflecting on their practice from different perspectives and reaching a coherent framework that orients their daily work with children and families.
- Invest in adequate spaces for adults, both professionals and parents, in order to encourage both the involvement of families in the centers, the opportunity to reflect together as professionals and the possibility of activating cultural and social initiatives of public interest with the community, about issues related to early childhood development, education and care.

Rationale 5. Leaders and coaches play an important role in supporting the professional development of ECEC staff and the implementation of new practices. They provide coaching and expert support and a safe environment for innovations. To create sustainable change, ECEC professionals need to be supported and enabled to develop innovations, co-reflect on spaces, infrastructure, materials, etc. Professionals cannot be left alone in dealing with their questions. Guidance is needed, an 'external eye' that can help staff in putting reflection into practice. The primary role of the director and/or pedagogical coach in this process is to facilitate the reflection path of the team and to help staff in always finding the connection between their vision and their actions. ECEC leaders need to combine a bottom-up and a top-down approach by being able to be the 'motor of change' and at the same time letting professionals being active participants in their learning path

and transformation. Staff quality is maintained by leadership that motivates and encourages working as a team, information sharing, and professional staff development.⁴⁵ ECEC spaces should be designed following a holistic approach based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable.

Recommendations:

- Invest in hiring pedagogical coaches on the municipality or individual ECEC level and building a system of professional support for staff.
- Invest in CPD for pedagogical coaches and directors/managers of the ECEC services, focusing on the *educare* approach and development of the skills related to the observation of the ECEC contexts in order to promote knowledge of the processes that take place in the space, interactions between ECEC professionals and between children and ECEC professionals.

Rationale 6. ECEC spaces should be designed following a holistic approach based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable. When (re)designing ECEC spaces, it is important to listen to 'all voices' involved, meaning here children, families, professionals. Services should offer a nurturing and caring environment and provide a social, cultural, and physical space with a range of possibilities for children to develop their present and future potential. Professionals and parents should feel comfortable in the ECEC spaces.

Recommendations:

- Create a multidisciplinary team when working on (re)building ECEC spaces/infrastructures; involve pedagogues, architects, policy makers, families, ECEC staff, and children.
- Start from a clear, shared socio-pedagogical vision to be sure that the budget is well spent.
- When (re)designing ECEC spaces, it is important to create dedicated spaces for staff and parents to meet, discuss, reflect together, exchange, and share their experiences and concerns.

Rationale 7. Both indoor and outdoor environments offer significantly different - but complementary - experiences and 'ways of being' of young children. They should be available simultaneously and experienced jointly, with each having equal status and attention because both contribute to young children's wellbeing, health, stimulation, and general development. The educator's role outdoor should be considered just as important as the adult's role indoor. Young children need ECEC professionals who value and enjoy the outdoor themselves and see its potential for young children's wellbeing and development.

Recommendations:

- Invest in quality outdoor space of ECEC settings. Outdoor space should be considered a necessary part of an early years' environment. It needs to be organized in a way that maximizes its value and usability for children and adults, and its design should support developmentally appropriate practice and be driven by

⁴⁵ Starting Strong II (2006). Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD, Paris.

children's interests and needs. Space itself and resources, layout, planning, and routines need to be open-ended and flexible to maximize their value for the child.

- Foster and promote the connection of inside and outside spaces through implementation of the activities that begin inside of the ECEC settings and have their continuity in outside spaces and vice versa.
- Allow the surrounding neighborhood to be visible from the outdoor spaces -and if possible also from the indoor spaces- of the ECEC center: the boundaries of the center should be defined but also allow to observe elements of the outside world in order to enrich the spatial experience of children.
- Enhance purposefully use of the spaces available in the surrounding neighborhood of the ECEC center, significantly enriching children's educational environment and helping to achieve educational goals, linking them with the real life of children.

Rationale 8. Giving children a sense of belonging to something more significant than the immediate family or setting lays the foundations for living as a community. ECEC centers can purposefully use the resources available in the community (library, bakery, fire station, post office, etc.), which significantly enriches the children's educational environment and helps achieve educational goals, linking them with real-life examples of children. Educational environments outside the ECEC centers provide children with new impressions, experiences, support development of social, cognitive, communication, artistic skills, help children to be in harmony with the surrounding socio-cultural environment and nature.

Recommendations:

- Introduce child-friendly integrated policies to mobilize different services across sectors to support families and children.
- Provide ECEC centers with opportunities to utilize community resources (e.g., common public spaces as playgrounds) for children's holistic development.
- Envision the whole community as a learning environment where children can improve their knowledge and skills (e.g., zoo, botanical garden, puppet theater, shops, parks, etc.).

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to inform future ECEC policies and practices related to spaces and *educare* approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant disruptions to families' lives through physical distancing, closure of ECEC centers, lockdown. The world health crisis has had profound implications for the care and education of young children in homes and ECEC settings.

Crises are challenging, but they can also allow us to rethink our taken-for-granted practice and discover new possibilities. During the COVID-19 crisis, the safety and hygiene rules to which suddenly all ECEC centres had to adapt also influenced the organization of spaces. On many levels, the effects have been and are perceived as 'negative' for obvious reasons (e.g., lack of contacts with families, less 'cozy' atmosphere due to hygiene rules, fear, etc.). Parents were suddenly expected to do homeschooling. Children were facing reduced social interaction opportunities with extended family, peers, and community members; disruptions to the continuity of ECEC-related learning; limited access to social services and other forms of support for

families; drastic reductions in face-to-face meetings with ECEC professionals and friends.¹⁶ A compilation from several reviews of the research literature and the documents published by global organizations identified the following problems associated with the pandemic¹⁷:

- massive re-organization of family life, which brought up a tension between more stress vs. pleasure in enjoying more calm family-time;
- disconnection of children from their peers at school/ECEC centre, informal play activities, and visits to one another homes;
- escalation of the number of children living in extreme poverty;
- the inability of families to provide consistent care, safe environment, and support education at home;
- ECEC staff's insufficient preparation to support digital learning.

However, some positive insights were gained and may inform future policies and practices.

Importance and relevance of ECEC for holistic child development and general wellbeing

The results of the global Save the Children survey¹⁸ reported that parents described the negative impact of the closure of the ECEC settings on their children's social and emotional wellbeing, which they suggested, resulted in tantrums, anxiety, clinginess, boredom, and under-stimulation. Parents also highlighted how screens were being used as a "digital babysitter" to replace the care and education usually provided in an ECEC setting. Most parents commented on the harmful effects of the lack of early education and care. Researchers¹⁹ have highlighted how the restrictions are likely to have harmful psychological effects on children and parents. More significant stress from social isolation, including the cancellation of important events and the loss of in-person social interactions, was strongly associated with mental health deterioration. Remote activities are essential in extreme crises but cannot replace face-to-face contact.

A deeper understanding of the importance of family involvement and quality interactions

ECEC staff had to find new ways to connect with families, who were in most cases not allowed in the services anymore. Many contacts took place online (during and after the lockdown), with activities for children, storytelling, individual phone calls, or door-to-door visits, especially to keep contact with families and children with vulnerable backgrounds. A new 'space' had to be created, an emotional and relational space capable of also connecting from a distance. Although challenging, this new practice gave many professionals the opportunity to get closer to the family situation of the children attending the ECEC center, to 'see' how they live, to value what they do at home, and the challenges they might face. The pandemic also underlined how crucial face-to-face interactions are in ECEC, with children, and with adults.

Reclaiming the outdoor spaces as equally important learning environments

The COVID-19 crisis helped to rediscover the outdoor space. Since it was advised to be outside to prevent the spread of the virus, many ECEC centres re-arranged the outdoor space, and they started to use it more than before. Also, meetings with families and some familiarization moments for new inscribed children

¹⁶ Van Laere, K., Sharmahd, N., Lazzari, A., Serapioni, M., Brajčević, S., Engdahl, I., Heimgaertner, H., Lambert, L., Hulpia, H. (2021). 'Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic', NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/642131.

¹⁷ Reimers, F. M.; Schleicher, A. (2020). A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020

¹⁸ <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/media/media-releases/largest-global-survey-of-covid-19>

¹⁹ Brooks SK et al. (2020). The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: Rapid review of the evidence. *Lancet* 2020 Feb 26; [e-pub]. ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8))

would happen outdoor. This can be an exciting starting point to invest more in outdoor infrastructures for children and families.

Rethinking the relevance of spaces and materials

From research carried out in Belgium (FL)²⁰ for a European report for the NESET II network about the effects of COVID-19 on ECEC,²¹ it comes out that some staff and children appreciate the fact that the preschool toilets now have to be cleaned more often. Some children say that they like more to go to the bathroom in school now because toilets are cleaner. This is a small but important element when thinking about *educare* and spaces: taking care of the spaces in which the 'routine' moments happen is crucial for the wellbeing of children and adults. Additionally, traditionally arranged spaces were reorganized to provide educational opportunities while caring for children's and adults' wellbeing (e.g., entrances where parents leave and pick up their children, etc.).

Smaller child/adult ratios

The advice to work with smaller groups of children supported the organization of a 'calmer' and 'warmer' space in many cases. Also, the eating moment happened in some cases in the group rooms (instead of in big common areas), which turned out to be an appreciated practice for both children and adults.

Importance of investing in equipment and education of ECEC staff in relation to IT /digital literacy

The coronavirus pandemic can serve as a wake-up call for governments to reassess the digital needs of the ECEC sector and invest more in education offered to all. Many children are in a situation of profound education inequality that negatively impacts their possibilities to reach quality education. It needs to be noted that digital tools can support the relationship with children and families, but they cannot replace it. Given the young age of children in ECEC, remote delivery of learning activities and prolonged exposure to screens are considered neither appropriate nor desirable. Instead, educational relationships can be ensured in remote environments by sustaining parents' capacity to provide emotional support and safe spaces for their children to thrive and explore despite restrictions. The reciprocity of communication exchanges should therefore be prioritized over the implementation of home-based learning activities. Parents should be viewed as co-educators rather than substitute ECEC professionals. Within this framework, investment should be made toward improving ICT infrastructure, as digital tools can support working on *educare* during the crisis and beyond. Digital tools can help ECEC staff have ongoing contacts with families and share pedagogical documentation of children's experiences with parents. Adequate training for staff on how to use ICT infrastructures should be provided too when needed. ECEC centres can create open and transparent communication with families through digital tools. The latter can support *educare* and create an emotionally warm relational space capable of connecting also from a distance.

²⁰ Lambert, L. & Van Laere, K. (VBJK, January 2021). NESET II country data report Belgium (FL). Unpublished document

²¹ Van Laere, K., Sharmahd, N., Lazzari, A., Serapioni, M., Brajčević, S., Engdahl, I., Heimgaertner, H., Lambert, L., Hulpia, H. (2021). Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis. Lessons learned from the Covid 19 pandemic. NESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union