

AUSTRIA

Key contextual data

Compiled by

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Contents

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC)..... 3**
 - Historical milestones in ECEC in Austria.....3
 - ECEC system type and auspices.....4
 - General objectives and legislative framework.....5
 - ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance6
 - Main types of provision.....6
 - Provider structures.....7
 - Participation rates in regulated provision.....8
 - Financing and costs for parents9
 - Staff-child ratios and group size10
 - Curricular framework11
 - Digital education.....11
 - Monitoring – evaluation.....11
 - Inclusion agenda.....13
 - Parental leave arrangements14
 - Current challenges for the ECEC system in Austria (*Marisa Krenn-Wache*)... .15

- Demographic data 16**
 - Total population16
 - Total fertility rate.....16
 - Children under 6 years of age16
 - Single households with children under 6 years of age17
 - Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age17
 - Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion19

- References 19**



Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

In alignment with country-specific usage, the terms used in this report for the main forms of centre-based ECEC provision are **childcare centre** (*Kinderkrippe*, 0–2) and **kindergarten** (*Kindergarten*, 3–5)¹. Any additional forms are described where appropriate.

Historical milestones in ECEC in Austria

1830	First custodial institution (<i>Bewahranstalt</i>) established in Vienna for children from families in need of support.
1832	State regulation assigns the supervision and control of all <i>Bewahranstalten</i> to the Catholic church – as private charities without any state financing and not linked to schools.
1863	First kindergarten founded with an explicitly educational orientation (based on Comenius, Oberlin, Pestalozzi, Froebel).
1869	Imperial School Act – liberalisation of education; church loses supervision rights over kindergartens.
1871	A professional organisation for kindergarten educators is founded.
1872	– First kindergarten legislation with general country-wide standards – the decree promotes a Froebelian approach to early childhood education. – A framework plan for the training of kindergarten educators is included in the decree.
After 1879	Liberalism loses its momentum.
1896/97	40% of kindergartens are run by public agencies, 25% by humanitarian associations, 8.5% by religious orders or the church and 25.6% by private individuals, such as factory owners. The relative share of public institutions continues to grow over the years.
1900	Educational institutions for children before compulsory schooling come under the supervision of school authorities.
1914	Wartime Kindergarten Act transfers responsibility for kindergartens from the education sector to the social welfare sector, with youth offices in charge of supervision.
Up to 1939	Expansion of kindergartens takes place, mostly in Vienna, where innovative pedagogical approaches are developed, e.g. along psychoanalytical lines under the influence of Anna Freud and Erik Erikson.
1939–1945	Under the national socialist regime, these reform-oriented movements are suppressed and the pedagogical programme is changed to include goals such as “obedience” and “heroism”.
1962	Legislative competence for kindergartens is transferred to the nine Austrian provinces; responsibility for the professional education of kindergarten staff remains at the federal level.
1965-1975	Focus of early childhood education is primarily on cognitive development.
From 1975	Social-emotional learning becomes more important, play and learning are on an equal footing; promotion of the child's overall personality becomes the basis for early childhood education goals.
ab 1980	Increased expansion of kindergartens and stronger scientific foundation of approaches to learning
1990	Legal regulations to increase the compatibility of family and work in the 1990s

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for pre-primary settings in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years.



1994	Introduction of 4-semester courses (“College for Kindergarten Pedagogy”) as a training opportunity for persons with advanced school-leaving certificate
1995	70% of 3 to 5 year-olds are enrolled in a kindergarten.
1997	Increased investment in the expansion of childcare facilities as a family policy issue for better reconciliation of work and family life
2000	Entitlement to paternity allowance for fathers is introduced.
2002	Federal Government funded projects focus on intercultural education and language enhancement.
2004	Promoting giftedness as a key indicator for the quality of education is also discussed for the ECEC sector.
2008	Introduction of a framework plan for early childhood settings valid across the country (further guidance follows in subsequent years)
2008	Agreement between the federal and regional governments to expand early childhood provision with an emphasis on the under 3 year olds and language support
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agreement between federal and regional governments to introduce a free and compulsory kindergarten year for 5 and 6 year-olds – Tax relief for childcare costs for all under 10 year olds is introduced.
2011	– Agreement between federal and regional governments to further expand childcare provision for under 3 year-olds and to extend opening hours
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ministerial Council Decision on language assessment (children in need of language support are given specific tuition) – In April 2012, the section "Early Childhood Education" is founded within the ÖFEB (Austrian Society for Research and Development in Education).
2013	Act on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF): Classification of training for kindergarten educators at Level 5: Short Cycle Tertiary Education (ISCED 2011)
2016	Ministerial Council Decision on the reorganisation of the transition from kindergarten to school, including passing on information in the context of school enrolment
2016	Revision of the nation-wide curriculum for the professional education/training of early childhood staff (including a stronger emphasis on under 3 year-olds) and a renaming of the professional training institutions as <i>Bildungsanstalten für Elementarpädagogik</i> - Educational Institutions for Early Childhood Pedagogy (replacing the term Kindergarten Pedagogy)
2018	Consolidated Federation-Länder Agreement on the expansion of early childhood education and care comes into force.
2019	Introduction of 3-year vocational training schools for Pedagogical Assistants
2020	Introduction of study programmes in early childhood education at higher education institutions specialising in pedagogy (<i>Pädagogische Hochschulen</i>) as a lateral entry option into the profession
2022	Introduction of 4-semester study programmes in inclusive early childhood education at higher education institutions specialising in pedagogy (<i>Pädagogische Hochschulen</i>) for the continuing qualification of kindergarten educators.

Sources: Berger 2005; FMESC 2005; Krenn-Wache 2018; Willekens and Scheiwe 2020

ECEC system type and auspices²

Austria is a federal state comprising nine autonomous *Länder* (Burgenland, Carinthia, Lower Austria, Upper Austria, Salzburg, Styria, Tirol, Vorarlberg and Vienna), each with its own legislative

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

and executive competences. In accordance with the federal state structure, responsibility for early childhood education and care lies primarily with the *Länder*, and regulations vary considerably. Therefore, despite recent Federation-Länder Agreements, the ECEC system cannot be described as fully integrated but rather as “partially integrated”.

Since 2018, the Department of Early Childhood Education, Social Pedagogy and Preschool Integration in the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (FMESR) has been responsible for the coordination and implementation of the Federal-Länder Agreements (FMESR 2021a) as well as for the professional education and training of pedagogical staff and the curricular framework for ECEC institutions (see section on *Curricular framework*).

Since February 2021, the Department of Family and Youth in the Federal Ministry of Labour, Family and Youth has been assigned to the Federal Chancellery. According to the 2021 amendment to the Federal Ministries Act, which came into force in 2022, the Federal Chancellery is now responsible for "general family policy matters, including the coordination of family policy and family support, as well as population policy in family and youth matters" (Federal Chancellery 2021a).

The nine *Länder*, through their own legislation, have overall responsibility for the ECEC sector as well as for supporting the municipalities in the building of ECEC provision. The *municipalities* are responsible for establishing and maintaining the running of kindergartens for 3 to 6 year-olds and childcare centres for under 3 year-olds.

General objectives and legislative framework

Pursuant to § 15a of the Federal Constitutional Act, a consolidated Agreement on Early Childhood Education between the Federal Government and the nine federal states came into force in October 2021, bringing together previous agreements into one legal provision (FLIS 2021). The Agreement was updated for the kindergarten years 2022/23 to 2026/27 (FLIS 2023), with the following overall goals:

- Strengthening early childhood educational institutions in their role as the first educational institution in a child's life
- Promoting children's holistic development in alignment with the nationwide curricular framework plan, especially in German as the language of instruction as well as mathematical, technical and scientific competences; promoting children's psychosocial and physical development in an age-appropriate way and relating to artistic, musical, creative and emotional competence
- Facilitating the entry into primary school (Austrian: *Volksschule*) in the sense of transition management and increasing equal opportunities for educational and professional pathways, regardless of the children's socio-economic and cultural background
- Supporting the education and upbringing of children according to nationally agreed and empirically proven pedagogical concepts, taking into account their respective age, individual abilities and individual needs
- Improving the compatibility of family and work and gender equality
- Recognising and transmitting fundamental values of Austrian society in early childhood educational institutions and through home-based ECEC providers.

Among the specific measures to be taken are:

- Implementing a standardised, compact language proficiency assessment tool (BESK-DaZ KOMPAKT, FMESR 2021d)

- Increasing support for language development in 4 year-olds
- Driving forward training for kindergarten pedagogues and language support staff
- Binding transmission of fundamental values
- Clear definition of the objectives of education and care through the specification of key educational documents
- Increased focus on the transition from kindergarten to school
- Increased monitoring and cooperation between the Federal Government and federal states
- Constant and efficient (impact) evaluation
- Continuation of the mandatory free kindergarten year for 5 year-olds
- Focus on the expansion of early childhood education programmes for children under 3 years of age
- Ensure more flexible and longer opening hours; improve working conditions and childcare ratio
- Promotion of home-based ECEC providers as an alternative to early childhood education institutions.

The legislative framework at the federal level for early childhood education and care is the Youth Welfare Act (1989) with subsequent amendments; each of the nine *Länder* has its own Kindergarten Act.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

In Austria, there is no universal entitlement to a place in a kindergarten or childcare centre. However, since the *Länder* have been obliged since September 2009 to provide a kindergarten place for children who have turned 5 by the end of August in the year before starting school, children are guaranteed a place during this year. Since 2018, attendance is **compulsory** for at least 20 hours a week, which are free of charge for parents and known as the ‘free kindergarten year’ (Federal Chancellery 2021a). In addition to the regular holiday periods and a number of ‘school-free’ days, parents are permitted to take a three-week holiday. An exemption from compulsory attendance may be granted under certain conditions (e.g. illness, severe physical or mental impairment, medical reasons, remote place of residence) at the request of the parent or guardian.

For children under 5 years of age, enrolment in an ECEC setting is voluntary.

Compulsory primary schooling begins in the September following the child's 6th birthday and lasts for nine years.

Main types of provision

Childcare centres (*Kinderkrippen, Krabbelstuben, Kleinkindbetreuungseinrichtungen*) provide places for infants and toddlers under 3 years of age. In 2022/23, there were 2,650 such childcare settings in Austria.

Kindergartens (*Kindergärten*) are the traditional form of provision for children aged 2½ to 3 years up to school entry at the age of 6. In 2022/23, the number of kindergartens totalled 4,602.

Mixed-age groups (*altersgemischte Gruppen*), a relatively new form of provision for 1 to 5/6 year-olds, are also available (1,557 in 2022/23). They are mostly located in kindergartens and to be found in areas where there are not enough children to establish same-age settings. Some of

the mixed-age groups are **parent-managed children’s groups** (*elternverwaltete Kindergruppen*), characterised through a high level of parental responsibility and decision-making.

In 2022/23, there were a total of 9,717 ECEC and school-age settings comprising 21,888 groups attended by 388,256 children. The majority of these facilities were open all day (Statistics Austria 2023).

Home-based ECEC provision is primarily for very young children. In most of the nine *Länder* providers are expected to have some kind of pedagogical training (Federal Ministry for Digitalisation and Economic Location 2021a). In 2022/23, approximately 2.2% of children under 3 years of age and 0.7% of 3 to under 6 year-olds across the country were cared for by 2,011 home-based providers (Statistics Austria 2023, own calculations).

According to the Federation-*Länder* Agreement, ECEC settings should be open at least 45 hours per week (at least 9½ hours per day on at least four days) and for at least 47 weeks per year (Eurydice 2023). Exact opening hours vary according to region, state and provider. However, most are open at least six hours a day and almost all (99%) are open over lunch. Most open around 7:00/7:30 and close around 17:00/18:00. On average, ECEC settings have 21.9 closing days per year. In general, the trend towards longer opening hours continues (Statistics Austria 2023).

Over the past 15 years or so there has been a significant expansion in the number of early childhood settings, particularly of childcare centres and mixed-age provision. Between 2005 and 2022/23 the number nearly tripled. At the same time, the number of kindergartens sunk over the past seven years although the number of children enrolled in them increased slightly.

Table 1

Austria: Number of centre-based ECEC settings by type and children enrolled at different time points, 2005 to 2022/23

Year	Childcare centres		Kindergartens		Mixed-age settings		Total	
	Settings	Children	Settings	Children	Settings	Children	Settings	Children
2005/06	889	16,037	4,482	195,176	554	18,307	5,371	229,520
2015/16	1,760	33,500	4,664	217,952	1,663	45,673	8,087	297,125
2022/23	2,650	53,529	4,602	235,222	1,67	48,692	9,717	337,443

Source: Statistics Austria 2023

Provider structures

The distribution of provider types differs considerably from province to province. While, for example, about 86.3% of the childcare centres in Carinthia have a private provider, this is only the case for 4.7% in Burgenland. Private mixed-age settings are found most frequently (87.2%) in Vienna, and least frequently in Burgenland (8%). In Lower Austria almost all kindergartens (97.3%) are public, but in Vienna only 44.5% (Statistics Austria 2023).

In Austria, slightly more than half of the childcare centres and almost three quarters of mixed-age facilities are privately run, whereas almost three quarters of the kindergartens are publicly run. These ratios are also reflected in the number of children enrolled.



Table 2

Austria: Number of settings and children by provider type, 2022/23

ECEC setting type	Provider type					
	Public			Private		
	Number of settings	Share, in %	Number of children	Number of settings	Share, in %	Number of children
Childcare centres	1,322	49.9	25,259	1,328	50.1	28.270
Kindergartens	3,353	72.9	180,969	1,249	27.1	54.253
Mixed-age settings	414	26.4	12,161	1,153	73.6	36.531
	5,089		218,389	3,730		119.054

Source: Statistics Austria 2023

Participation rates in regulated provision

Participation rates, particularly for the under-threes, vary considerably between urban and rural areas and from federal state to federal state: e.g. in 2022/23 the attendance rate for under-threes was 19.9% in Styria and 42% in Vienna. Across the country, 29.9% of under 3 year-olds and 94.4% of 3 to under 6 year-olds attend an ECEC setting. At the beginning of September 2022, 388,256 children were enrolled in a centre-based setting (including school-age childcare facilities). Most attended a kindergarten (235,222), 53,529 a childcare centre and 48,692 a mixed-age setting (Statistics Austria 2023).

Table 3

Austria: Number of children in ECEC settings (excluding school-age childcare facilities) and enrolment rates by age, 2022/23

Age group	Childcare centres	Kindergartens	In mixed-age settings	Number of children	Enrolment rates, in %
Up to 1 year	1,295	3	310	1,608	2.0
1 year-olds	19,958	189	3,264	23,411	27.1
2 year-olds	28,580	14,322	8,444	51,346	59.4
Up to 3 years	49,833	14,514	12,018	76,365	29.9
3 year-olds	3,003	63,408	11,045	77,456	88.8
4 year-olds	347	75,908	10,148	86,403	96.0
5 year-olds	255	79,964	9,348	89,567	98.0
3 to under 6 year-olds	3,605	219,280	30,541	253,426	94.4
Up to 6 years	53,438	233,794	42,559	329,791	n.d.

Source: Statistics Austria 2023

In 2022/23, roughly half (52.8%) of the children attended kindergarten full time, 70.8% a mixed-aged setting full time and 57.6% were in a full-day childcare centre (Statistics Austria 2023).

According to Eurostat data, the proportion of children under 3 years of age in ECEC settings has increased significantly since 2005: while in 2005 only 4% of these children were cared for in centre-based settings, by 2022 the proportion had grown to 23%. The proportion of children aged 3 up to primary school entry attending a centre-based setting had also increased, from 69% in 2005 to 91.9% in 2022 (see Table 4).

Table 4

Austria: Enrolment rates by age and weekly hours of attendance, 2005-2022

Year	Weekly hours of attendance	Under 3 year-olds, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29	4	53
	Over 30	0	16
	No enrolment in ECEC	96	31
2010	1 to 29	6	57
	Over 30	3	26
	No enrolment in ECEC	91	17
2015	1 to 29	13.7	57.7
	Over 30	8.6	27.6
	No enrolment in ECEC	77.8	14.7
2022	1 to 29	14.6	54.6
	Over 30	8.4	37.3
	No enrolment in ECEC	77.0	8.1

Source: Eurostat 2023b, differences in the totals due to rounding

Financing and costs for parents

According to OECD data, total public expenditure on early childhood education and care amounted to 0.55% of GDP in 2019 (OECD 2023).

Early childhood education and care in Austria is mainly publicly funded. According to Austrian constitutional law, the financing of ECEC facilities is primarily the responsibility of the *Länder* and the municipalities.

From 2019 to 2021, the federal government made €142.5 million available as special-purpose subsidies and €70 million for the ‘free’ kindergarten year. Annually, €47 million are earmarked for the expansion of childcare provision and €18 million for language support; the difference can be spent flexibly by the *Länder*, which co-finance around €38 million (Federal Chancellery 2021c).

Through the 2021 Federation-*Länder* Agreement on Early Childhood Education between the Federal Government and the nine federal states, both levels are committed to enhanced investment in ECEC. The Agreement regulates the procedures and the conditions/obligations related to the receipt by the *Länder* of additional financial resources (subsidies) from the federal government (FMESR 2021).

Since 2010, part-time kindergarten attendance has been free of charge for parents in the year before starting primary school (‘free kindergarten year’). In some *Länder* this also applies to full-day enrolment. In Vienna, for example, attendance at a public ECEC setting is free of charge for parents of 0 to 6 year-olds. Otherwise, costs vary depending on the province and are partly income-related. Job-seekers or parents whose gross monthly income does not exceed €2,300 can apply for (income-dependent) childcare assistance (Federal Ministry for Digitalisation and Economic Location 2021a).

Monthly fees in public ECEC settings can vary between €100 to €440. Up to €2,300 per year can be claimed against tax for childcare costs (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 58).

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 2% of net household income on childcare costs³ (OECD.Stat 2023).

Staff-child ratios and group size

Staff-child ratios are regulated by the *Länder* (Bundeskanzleramt 2021, 953ff) and can vary considerably.

Group size in **childcare centres** ranges from 7 to 15 children per group, in **kindergartens** from 20 to 25 children. In **mixed-age settings** both group size and the number of staff are dependent on the ages of the children attending. They range in size from 5 to 10 children.

As a rule, one fully qualified pedagogue is present in each group, but the number of assistants varies greatly in the federal states according to the size of the group, the age of the children or the time allocated to educational activities in the setting.

Across all *Länder* and child groups, staff-child ratios range between 10:1 in Carinthia and Tirol and 16:1 in Vorarlberg (Federal Chancellery 2021b, 9154).

Table 5

Austria: Group size and number of staff per group by *Länder*

Federal states/ <i>Länder</i>	Childcare centre 0–2 (per group)			Kindergarten 3–5 (per group)			Mixed-age settings (per group)		
	Max. number of children	Professional	Assistant staff	Max. number of children	Professional	Assistant staff	Max. number of children	Professional	Assistant staff
Burgenland	15	1	1	25	1	1 ¹	25	1	1 ¹
Carinthia	15	1	variable	25	1	1	20-25	1	1
Lower Austria	n/s	n/s	n/s	25	1	1 ²	10-15	1	1 ³
Upper Austria	10	1	1 ⁴	23	1	'necessary number'	18-23	1	'necessary number'
Salzburg	8	1	0.5-1	22	1	0.5-1	22	0,5	0.5-1
Styria	14	1	0.5	25	1	1	20	1	1
Tirol	7	1	1	20	1	1	12-20	1	1
Vorarlberg	9	1 person per 5 children under 2 ⁵		23	1	1 from 17 children upwards	12	1	2-3 depending on age constellation
Vienna	15	1	1	25	1	1	10-14	1	1 ⁶

¹Only for half of the opening time, ²only in the morning, ³only if children under 1 year present, ⁴from 6 children, ⁵no distinction between professional and assistant, ⁶if 1 child under 3 years present.

Source: Federal Chancellery 2021b, Tabellenband, 246-251

³ The calculation is based on: full-time working parents (average wage); two children aged 2 and 3 years in full-time childcare; childcare benefits included.

Curricular framework

A Nationwide Framework Curriculum for Austrian ECEC Services (*Bundeslandübergreifender BildungsRahmenPlan für elementare Bildungseinrichtungen*) for work with 0 to 6 year-olds was issued in 2009 (FMESR 2021b). The play-based framework formulates 12 learning principles (e.g. integrated learning, inclusion, gender sensitivity, participation, transparency) and six learning areas (emotions and social relationships; ethics and society; language and communication; movement and health; aesthetics and design; nature and technology).

Two additional sections focus on (1) language and communication and (2) the final year in kindergarten. The pedagogical staff select content and didactic approaches that are appropriate to the situation, context and age. They seek a balance between activities initiated by the child and those guided by the staff; these include theme-based project work as well as individual and group activities.

Guidelines were published in 2016 to support ECEC settings in implementing the mandatory framework (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 108).

Digital education

In the curricular framework, "Information and Communication Technologies (digital media)" is subsumed under the learning area "Language and Communication". The importance of promoting children's media competence is emphasised: Children should be enabled to use media critically but also creatively and thus to express themselves and also to create their own products (FMESR 2021b, 38).

To support ECEC staff, the Charlotte Bühler Institute was commissioned by the FMESR to develop guidelines for digital media education in ECEC settings (Charlotte Bühler Institute 2020). The promotion of media literacy is seen here as a cross-curricular task and complementary learning area. It is considered important that children - based on their individual experiences, their age and their development - can build up media competences in a co-constructive educational process. The use of digital media is recommended from the age of 3 for a maximum of 30 minutes per day and in the company of an adult. Children should gain experience in dealing with media, use them for their own needs, reflect on their own use of them and generally learn to think about the function of media. However, a learning environment without digital devices is also suggested, especially as a means of reflection and for acquiring basic knowledge. Data protection and the right to one's own image are further topics that are dealt with. The guidance also includes practical examples for involving parents or using digital media in every day kindergarten life (e.g. selection criteria for apps).

Monitoring – evaluation

Quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation procedures in early childhood education and care are the responsibility of the federal states.

In terms of quality assurance, the Federation-*Länder* Agreement 2021 (with amendments in 2023) states that the following guidelines, among others, apply throughout Austria (FMESR 2021c): Nationwide Framework Curriculum for Austrian ECEC Services; Guidelines for language support at the transition from kindergarten to primary school; Module for the final year in ECEC settings; and the Guidelines for the development of values in kindergarten.

Child-related assessment

Since 2005, language assessment tools have been used in kindergartens to detect possible support needs 15 months before school entry (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 113). Since 2019/20, the nationwide standardised instruments "BESK KOMPAKT" (for children with German as a first language) and "BESK-DaZ KOMPAKT" (for children with German as an additional language), developed by the Federal Institute for Educational Research, Innovation and Development of the Austrian School System (BIFIE), are used for language assessment (FMESR 2021d).

Based on the results of the language assessment, which must be carried out at least once from the age of 3, an obligatory transfer sheet mapping the developmental status of the child in the year preceding school entry is passed on from the ECEC setting to the primary school.

Centre-level internal evaluation

There is no general obligation to carry out internal evaluations, this is decided by the *Länder* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126). Upper Austria, for example, has developed its own self-evaluation tool (Directorate of Education Upper Austria 2021), which is used once a year by all ECEC settings in the region. The Charlotte Bühler Institute (Charlotte Bühler Institute 2021a) recommends the use of the German-language versions of the Infant Toddler Environment Scale - Revised (KRIPS-R) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (KES-R) to determine and support pedagogical quality in early childhood education centres. However, it is emphasised that they should not be used as pure assessment and control instruments. The Charlotte Bühler Institute therefore offers various training courses on the use of the scales.

External evaluation

In all *Länder* there are kindergarten supervisors/inspectors who are responsible for ensuring the pedagogical quality in ECEC settings (Eurydice 2023). They visit each setting at least once a year. The size and organisation of rooms and equipment are checked, and also the suitability of the staff. The BMBWF reserves the right to make unannounced visits. How the results are used in each case is decided by the *Länder* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 134).

Evaluations of the process quality in individual ECEC settings are also carried out by certified evaluators of the Charlotte Bühler Institute.

Evaluation studies

At the University of Graz Institute for Educational Research and Teacher Education (University of Graz 2021), a project on the implementation of quality development processes in ECEC settings was conducted from 2019 to 2021.

The Charlotte Bühler Institute, a research and development institute in Vienna established in 1992, carries out evaluation projects in the ECEC sector, for example: accompanying process quality assessment on educational cooperation in the border regions, including multilingual education (an EU project) (Charlotte Bühler Institute 2021b).

Evidence-based research and impact analyses on a variety of topics related to childcare, family and society are provided by the University of Vienna "Austrian Family Institute" (University of Vienna 2021).

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

Children with disabilities have the option of attending a regular kindergarten, a facility with integrative groups or a special needs kindergarten (Federal Ministry for Digitalisation and Economic Location 2021b). In an integrative group, an average of four children with disabilities and 16 children without disabilities are cared for together - by one kindergarten pedagogue, one special needs teacher and two kindergarten assistants. In therapeutic education groups, a maximum of twelve children with severe disabilities are cared for (Agency for Education and Internationalisation 2022).

The tasks, goals and frameworks of these settings are regulated by the federal states. If there are more than two children with special needs in a regular ECEC setting, an additional full-time, fully qualified member of staff must be employed. Children with special needs in integrative settings count as two children. There may not be more than four such children in an integrative group.

The number of children under 6 years of age with (impending) disabilities or children with special needs is not statistically recorded at the federal level. Due to the federal regulations, there is also considerable heterogeneity between the *Länder* with regard to integrative or inclusive regulations. There is no legal entitlement to inclusive settings in the elementary education sector. There are also no data on the share of inclusive or special needs settings.

Children with a migration background

At the beginning of 2023, approximately a quarter (26.4%) of the total population had a migration background and 19% held a non-Austrian citizenship. Most came from Germany, followed by persons from Romania, Serbia, Turkey, and Croatia; there was a particularly marked increase in persons from Ukraine (Federal Chancellery 2023, 7).

In 2022/23, about one third (32.5%) of all children in ECEC settings had a home language other than German, with large differences between the federal states (data without Styria), varying from 14.7% in Tyrol to 58.7% in Vienna. The differences between the age groups of under 3 year-olds and 3 to 5 year-olds are relatively small (30.9% vs. 32.4%) (Statistics Austria 2023).

More than three quarters (77.9%, data without Styria) of the children in ECEC settings have Austrian citizenship. Just under 3% come from Asian countries, about 3% from Romania, 1.5% from Germany, 1.4% from Serbia and 1.3% from Hungary (Statistik Austria 2023). In 2022/23, the share of foreign children was highest in mixed-age settings at 34.2% and lowest in childcare centres at 17.6% (Statistics Austria 2023, own calculations).

For some years, differences in the enrolment rates of children aged 1 to 5 with a migration background and those without have been decreasing: 76% vs. 70% (2022). Larger differences exist with regard to the enrolment rates of younger children: While 63% of 2 year-olds and 92% of 3 year-old Austrian children attend an ECEC setting, the figures for non-Austrian children are 52% and 83% respectively. From the age of 4, the enrolment rates are very high, regardless of citizenship: 97% of 4 year-old Austrian and 94% of non-Austrian children are cared for outside the household, in the obligatory last year of kindergarten this proportion rises to 98% vs. 97% (Federal Chancellery 2023, 42).

Children whose home language is not German are offered support in the kindergarten with regard to language development as well as assessments of their language competence. Since the kindergarten year 2019/20, language assessment for children with German as an additional language has been carried out nationwide through a standardised instrument called "BESK-DaZ KOMPAKT" (BMBWF 2021d). At the beginning of 2021/22, it revealed a need for support in the



German language for 28% of 4 and 5 year-old children (regardless of their first language), which decreased to 21% by the end of the year (Federal Chancellery 2023, 42).

In addition to German, some languages of minority groups are also spoken in Austria: Burgenland-Croatian, Hungarian and Romany in Burgenland; Slovene in Carinthia and Styria; Hungarian, Czech and Slovak in Vienna. In order to promote the respective home language in kindergarten, there are bilingual kindergartens in some federal states or the children are taught in their home language (Federal Chancellery 2015).

Parental leave arrangements⁴

Mandatory **Maternity leave** (*Mutterschaftskarenz*) starts eight weeks before the birth date and continues for eight weeks afterwards. Payment is 100% of average income during the three months preceding the beginning of maternity leave.

Fathers living in the same household as the mother and child are entitled to a month of **Paternity leave** (*Papamonat / Väterfrühkarenz*); This *family time bonus* is remunerated with €23.91 per calendar day. The month can be taken within 91 days after the birth.

Parental leave (*Elternkarenz*) is a family entitlement and can be taken until the child is 2 years old. A childcare benefit (*Kinderbetreuungsgeld*) is available to all families whether or not parents take Parental leave. Parents can choose from two options:

- 1) Flexible lump sum option (*Kinderbetreuungsgeldkonto*): Parents receive a sum of €13,085 (if only one parent receives it) or €16,389 (if both parents receive it), which they can spread over a certain period of time: between 365 days (i.e. €35.85 per day) and 851 days (i.e. €15.38 per day) for one parent and between 456 and 1,063 days for both parents.
- 2) Income-dependent option (*einkommensabhängiges Kinderbetreuungsgeld*): Here, 80% of the net income of the last six months is paid for 365 days (for one parent recipient) and up to 426 days (for two parent recipients). A maximum of €69.83 per day or €2,100 per month is paid. Up to €7,800 per year can be earned in addition.

With both variants, both parents can take only one month of Parental leave at the same time, in which case the total length is reduced by one month. If parents share their childcare benefit for at least 124 days, they receive a partnership bonus of €500 each. Since January 2019, working parents receive an additional family bonus as a tax-free amount of up to €2,000 (2022) per child until the child's 18th birthday.

Almost all those entitled make use of Parental leave (93-96%). As a rule, these are women. Statistics on option 1) mentioned above show that this was chosen by about two thirds of parents and that 36% of these parents applied for 28 months or more; 89% of these parents were mothers. 35% of parents chose option 2) for 12 to 14 months; here 30% of applicants were fathers. However, on average, fathers only claimed about 4.5% of all days allocated for childcare in Austria.

⁴ The brief summary in this section is based on the country note for Austria by Eva-Maria Schmidt and Andrea E. Schmidt in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see References).

Current challenges for the ECEC system in Austria

Country expert assessment by *Marisa Krenn-Wache*

Academic-level IPE programmes for early childhood education and new professorial chairs

Since 2018, Bachelor's degree programmes (180 ECTS) in early childhood education have been offered at higher education institutions specialising in pedagogy (*Pädagogische Hochschulen*). These courses are primarily designed for the further qualification of Early Childhood Pedagogues already working in the field.

From the academic year 2020/21 onwards, for the first time – alongside the regular and long-established vocational qualifying courses for Early Childhood Pedagogues – undergraduate study programmes will be offered at the *Pädagogische Hochschulen*. With the higher education course in "Early Childhood Education" (60 ECTS), a lateral entry option into the field has been created for persons with relevant prior initial professional education. From the summer semester 2023 onwards, another higher education course (120 ECTS) will offer graduates of non-relevant disciplines with a minimum of 180 ECTS a qualification with a professional licence.

Research and teaching in the field of early childhood pedagogy are underrepresented in Austria. It was not until 2010 that the first chair for early childhood pedagogy was established at the University of Graz (2021). Then, in 2015, a joint chair for early childhood education and upbringing was established at the University of Innsbruck (2021) and the University of Teacher Education Vorarlberg. Three Master's degree programmes started in 2014 in Salzburg (university course) and Vienna (BA programmes) (2021). In 2012, a section for Early Childhood Pedagogy was founded by the professional association for educational sciences "ÖFEB". A significant expansion of basic and applied research is urgently needed.

Further expansion initiatives and staff recruitment measures

According to national statistics and the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning, a growth of approximately 8% is expected in the population group of 0 to 5 year-olds. During the past ten years, the participation rates of 0 to 2 year-olds have doubled and it can be assumed that this development will continue. If population growth continues up to 2025, it has been estimated that a related 11,100 places will need to be made available in early childhood settings and an additional 3,600 places related to the increased enrolment rates. Targeted measures to ensure provision of places and to raise the attractiveness of the occupational field are needed across the country (Neuwirt 2016).

In 2022, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research won an award for an EU project on "Improving the framework conditions for staff to increase quality in early childhood education and care in Austria" (FMESR 2022). Within the framework of this project (duration 2022-2024), instruments are to be developed together with the federal provinces and with the involvement of other relevant stakeholders which will lead to improvements in the quality of early childhood education, in the availability and stability of pedagogical staff and in reducing staff shortages.

Transferring responsibility for early childhood education to the federal level

Since 1962, legislative and executive powers for the early childhood sector have come under the auspices of the nine federal states. There has long been a demand on the part of the relevant professional association for a transfer of responsibility for early childhood education and care to the federal government level. Federal framework legislation is seen as the way forward in order to improve and unify the very disparate conditions and terms of employment to be found

in the individual *Länder* and offered by the various ECEC providers. However, a solution to change this legal situation, which would require a two-thirds majority in parliament, is not in sight.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Total population

In 2022, the population of Austria totalled 8,978,929. Over the past two decades it has increased steadily – 2000: 8,002,186; 2010: 8.351.643; 2020: 8,901,864 (Eurostat 2023a).

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27(2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate of the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries (EU27+6) was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.48, Austria is slightly below the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023c⁵).

Children under 6 years of age

Table 6

Austria: Number of under 6 year olds by age, 2022

Age	Number of children
Up to 1 year	84,551
1 year-olds	84,286
2 year-olds	85,852
3 year-olds	87,503
4 year-olds	89,593
5 year-olds	90,231
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	522,016

Source: Eurostat 2023a

The proportion of children under 3 years of age in the total population was 2.8% in 2022, and that of children under 6 years of age was 5.8%. While these shares were slightly above the then EU15 average in 2000, they had fallen slightly below it by 2015. In 2022, they were again slightly above the respective EU averages (see *Table 7*).

⁵ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

Table 7

Austria: Relative share of under 6 year-olds in population compared with EU averages, 2000 to 2022, in %

Year	Comparison Austria/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	Austria	3.1	3.4	6.5
	Ø EU15 ⁶	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	Austria	2.9	2.9	5.8
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	Austria	2.8	2.8	5.7
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2022	Austria	2.8	3.0	5.8
	Ø EU27(2020)	2.7	2.9	5.7

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

Single households with children under 6 years of age

In 2022, more than three quarters (78.6%) of households with children under 6 years of age were couple households. Households with single parents accounted for only 2.6% - usually single mothers, the share of single fathers is very low at 0.1%.

Table 8

Austria: Households with children under 6 years of age, 2022

Household type	Number	Share of total households, in %*
Households – total	849,900	
Couple households	668,400	78.6
Other types of households	159,400	18.7
Single households, total	22,400	2.6
Single households, women	21,100	2.5
Single households, men	1,300**	0.1

Source: Eurostat 2023e, * Own calculations, ** data computed.

Employment rates of parents with children under 6 years of age

In Austria in 2022, the employment rate (15-64 years) of men as a whole was 82.1%, that of women 73.4% (Eurostat 2023g).

In 2022, 70,7% of women and 90.9% of men with children under 6 were in employment (18-64 years). The shares of employed fathers were thus above the average (87.2%) of the 27(2020) EU countries, those of mothers were significantly higher than the EU average (63.6%) (Eurostat 2023d).

⁶ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

Table 9a

Austria: Employment rates of parents with children below age 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 und 2022

	2010	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Austria	61.7	79.5
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁷	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 32.7	Latvia: 74.8
	2022	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %
Austria	70.7	90.9
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU- countries ⁸	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023d

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, data are displayed in *Table 9b*.

Table 9b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
+Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9
+++United Kingdom (2021/2023)	75.6	92.1	++72.3	++79.2
with dependent children	72.4	93.1	++72.1 (2023)	++79.4 (2023)
with children under 2 years	70.7	95.0		
with children 3–4 years				

*Eurostat 2023d, 2023g

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

***Rosstat. 2022. *Statistical annex SDG in Russia 2022*. <https://eng.rosstat.gov.ru/sdg/report/document/70355>;
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⁷ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

⁸ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

+++Office for National Statistics. 2023. *Families and the labour market, UK: 2021*.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021>

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁹

In 2022, 21.1% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was below the EU27 average (23.3%) for this age group. Also, the share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was at 17.5% below the European average of 21.6%. In 2020, 2.8% of children under 6 and 3% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU average 6.1% and 4.3% respectively) (Eurostat 2023e, f).

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⁹ 'At risk of poverty or social exclusion' refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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