

Early childhood education and care services (ECEC, ages 0–6) in Italy—particularly those for children under the age of 3—have seen growth over time in both the availability of places and participation rates among young children, although more slowly than in other European countries. Significant socioeconomic and territorial disparities persist, however, which—together with other barriers to access—disproportionately affect participation among children whose parents face economic and employment disadvantages, social vulnerability, or have a migrant background.

In some cases, as participation increases, these disparities actually widen. One example is the gap in participation among children under 3 from high-income versus low-income families in Italy, which has more than doubled over the past twenty years in favor of the former: the difference was 7.5 percentage points in 2005–06, when overall participation was still below 25%, but rose to 19 points in 2023–24, when around 35 out of 100 children in that age group attended nursery schools or similar services (see the chart below).

Italy’s ECEC therefore suffers from a lack of equity, although it is not the only one in Europe. In addition, attention to service quality in our country remains insufficient.

These are two concerning critical issues—especially in light of longstanding international research showing that participation in high-quality ECEC services can provide early support to strengthen cognitive, relational, and social skills, with long-term benefits across individuals’ life courses. These benefits are particularly evident for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to reduce gaps in development, learning, and socialization.

A comparative study

This is perhaps the most significant finding of a comparative study on ECEC services in France, Germany, England, Spain, and Italy, promoted by the Fondazione Agnelli and conducted by a group of national and international researchers, coordinated by Francesca Bastagli (Head of Research, Fondazione Agnelli) and Emmanuele Pavolini (Professor of Economic Sociology, University of Milan). The study—representing the first output of the broader multi-year “Zero Sei” program of the Fondazione Agnelli—was released today in a summary report titled *A Good Start: ECEC Systems in Italy and Europe*.

The research stems from the awareness that the expansion and improvement of the quality of ECEC services are now strategic priorities for public policy in Europe. Three major issues are at stake in these efforts:

- (i) children’s growth and development, alongside the reduction of inequalities;
- (ii) the reconciliation of work and caregiving responsibilities, particularly to support female employment;

(iii) responses to declining birth rates, which make it increasingly important to better support families in their caregiving and educational responsibilities.

“Two priorities emerge from the research,” explained Francesca Bastagli. “First: expanding access to early childhood education and care services, particularly for children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, who stand to benefit the most but are also at greater risk of exclusion. Second: promoting the quality of services. In pursuing these goals, countries face various policy ‘dilemmas’ or trade-offs, linked to the institutional structure of zero-to-six systems and to demographic and labor market changes. The comparative analysis identifies the main tensions, offering both a framework for understanding these issues and policy options to advance the early childhood education agenda.”

Italy in the European comparison

The experiences of European countries do not point to a single preferable model to follow. Each country has its own strengths, but also specific weaknesses, while others are shared across all systems. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis offers important lessons for Italy.

Today, among the five countries considered, Italy has the lowest availability of nursery places: about 32 per 100 children under 3, with long waiting lists. It is difficult to predict whether this will remain the case in the coming years, given the increase in places funded by the PNRR- National Recovery and Resilience Plan (and national funds) and the contribution of a sharper demographic decline than elsewhere. It is expected, however, that the PNRR—provided current delays are overcome and all funded projects are completed—will increase provision enough to reduce gaps between the Centre-North and the South, though disparities disadvantaging smaller municipalities are unlikely to improve.

Partly as a result of the slow expansion in provision, Italy also has one of the lowest participation rates for children under 3. The EU target for 2030—at least 45% participation—remains distant, given that Italy stands at 35.5% for 2025, according to EU-SILC data. France is close to 60%, Spain to 55%, while Germany is at a similar level to Italy, though with a key difference: its model includes 12–14 months of generously subsidized parental leave, meaning children typically start nursery at around one year of age (no recent UK data are available post-Brexit).

However, limited supply is not the only factor behind Italy’s low participation and unequal access. Other barriers also play a role.

First, economic barriers: while preschool (ages 3–6) is almost free, nursery fees can be high, especially in private services, which are widespread and more prevalent in the South. Public support for families often does not sufficiently benefit lower-income households. For example, despite improvements, the Bonus Asili Nido (Nursery Bonus) still requires families to pay fees upfront and receive reimbursement later—this can deter less affluent families.

Moreover—and this is crucial—there are barriers in the access criteria themselves. In Italy, these are largely designed to support work–care reconciliation, especially when both parents are employed. According to ISTAT, dual employment is considered by 94% of municipalities, and nearly half assign it the highest priority score. A better balance is needed between supporting working

parents (especially mothers) and ensuring children’s educational rights and support for more vulnerable families, as seen in Germany and Spain.

Another obstacle is the absence of a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC services, which only begins at primary school. Italy does not guarantee continuity between the end of parental leave and access to childcare services—indeed, this gap is the largest among the countries considered.

Regarding quality, all countries in the study face a serious shortage of staff, which significantly affects service quality. In Italy, recruitment of qualified educators is difficult: numbers are insufficient, and the profession is unattractive due to lower pay and poorer working conditions compared to the rest of the education sector, despite higher qualification requirements. Without a parallel increase in qualified staff (an estimated 25,000 additional educators will be needed), and without prioritizing pedagogical effectiveness and monitoring, Italy risks a significant decline in quality.

“Our analyses,” emphasized Andrea Gavosto, Director of the Fondazione Agnelli, “suggest that increasing participation and reducing inequalities cannot be achieved through expanding places alone. While expansion remains necessary—and we will soon see whether the PNRR reduces territorial disparities—it is not sufficient to ensure equitable access or improve quality. Policies must address access criteria, reduce the gap between parental leave and guaranteed placement, lower fees for low-income families, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.”

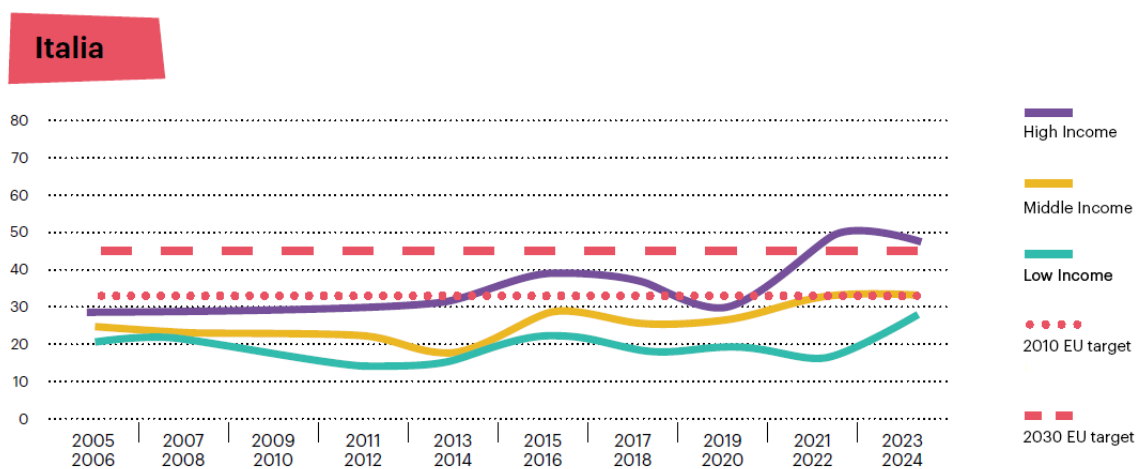
Policy recommendations

Based on these findings, the Fondazione Agnelli proposes several policy directions:

- **Introduce a right to ECEC access early childhood services**, progressively eliminating the gap between parental leave and guaranteed placement. Establishing entitlement from 18 or 24 months would support predictable pathways for families and better planning by municipalities.
 - **Reform access criteria and standardize them nationally**: shift from a work-oriented approach to a more equity-focused one, targeting disadvantaged groups. Germany and Spain provide useful examples, while France and England confirm that expanding supply alone does not ensure equity.
 - **Reduce financial barriers** by shifting public funding toward lowering fees. France, Spain, and Germany directly fund services to reduce or eliminate costs for families.
 - **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems**, including measures of process quality and equity (e.g., access by income, territory, citizenship), and link them to service improvement and funding.
 - **Develop a national workforce strategy** to ensure long-term quality: recruitment plans, training incentives, better pay and career prospects, and initiatives to attract more men into the sector.
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“The European comparison,” concluded Emmanuele Pavolini, *“shows that developing an integrated ECEC system is a key test of a state’s ability to guarantee fundamental rights, reduce inequalities, support children’s development, and foster employment. Italy has strong educational traditions, a solid preschool system, and a unique investment opportunity in the PNRR. However, structural challenges—access rights and equity, process quality, workforce strategy, and sustainable funding—require a change in governance and planning. If Italy can learn from both its own tradition and the innovations of other countries, it can turn investment in 0–6 services into a structural driver of growth and social cohesion.”*

Trend in participation rates in ECEC services (public, contracted, and private) for children up to age 3, broken down by different household income groups (2005–2024)



Source: Fondazione Agnelli’s calculations based on Eurostat EU-SILC microdata (2005–2024, biennial averages). Income tertiles are calculated based on the distribution of equivalized disposable household income among families with children aged 12 or younger.

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