

Starting strong or risk falling behind

Fondazione Agnelli

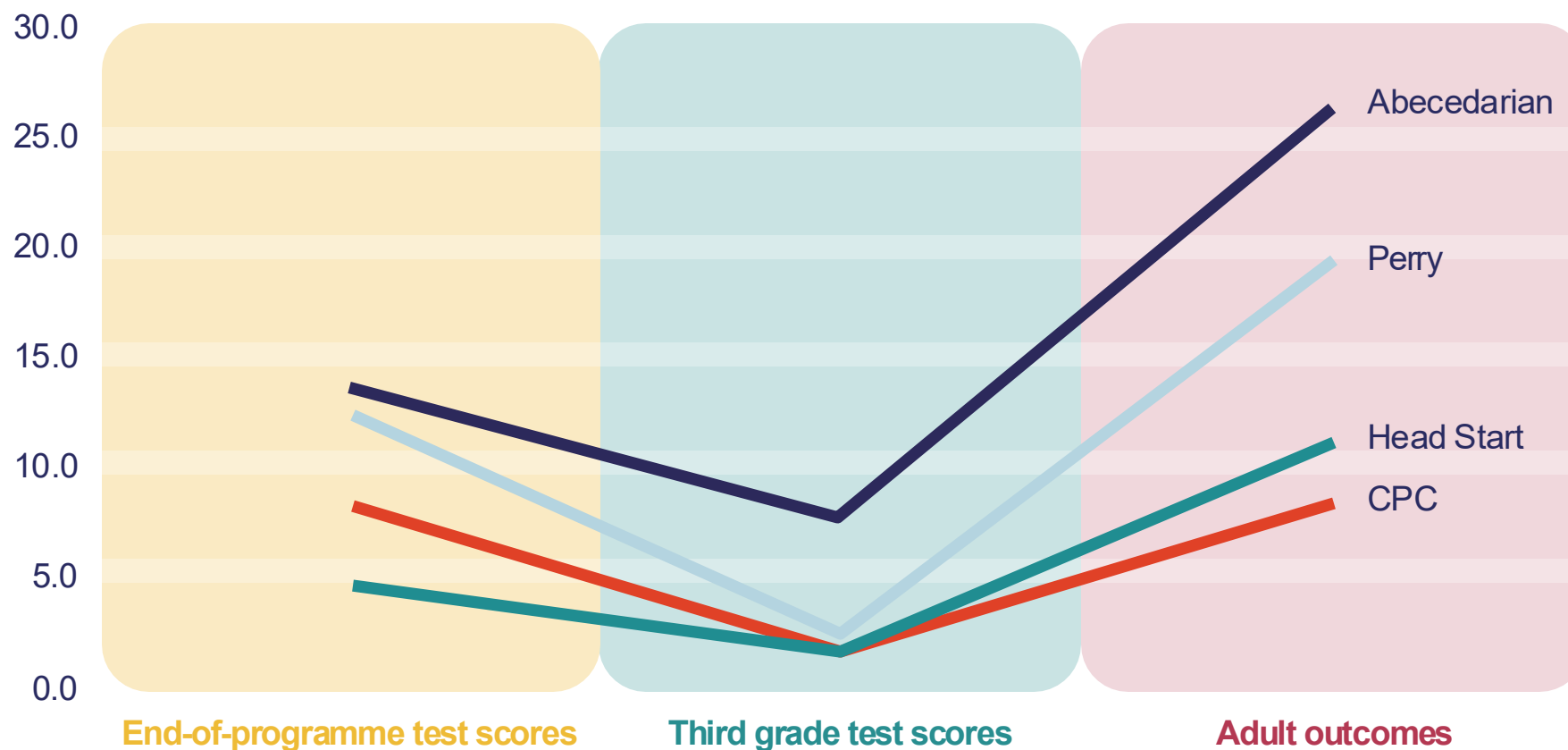
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Director for Education and Skills - OECD

September 2026

Combined early cognitive and social emotional development has enduring effects

Predicted percentage effects on adult earnings of early childhood programmes, based on test scores versus adult outcomes



(Source: Bartik, 2014)

Predicting later life outcomes ...



Emergent literacy

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+

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Emergent numeracy

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n/a

+

Self-regulation

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+

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Pro-social skills,
including empathy
and trust

+

+

+

=

Non-disruptive
behaviour

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+

+

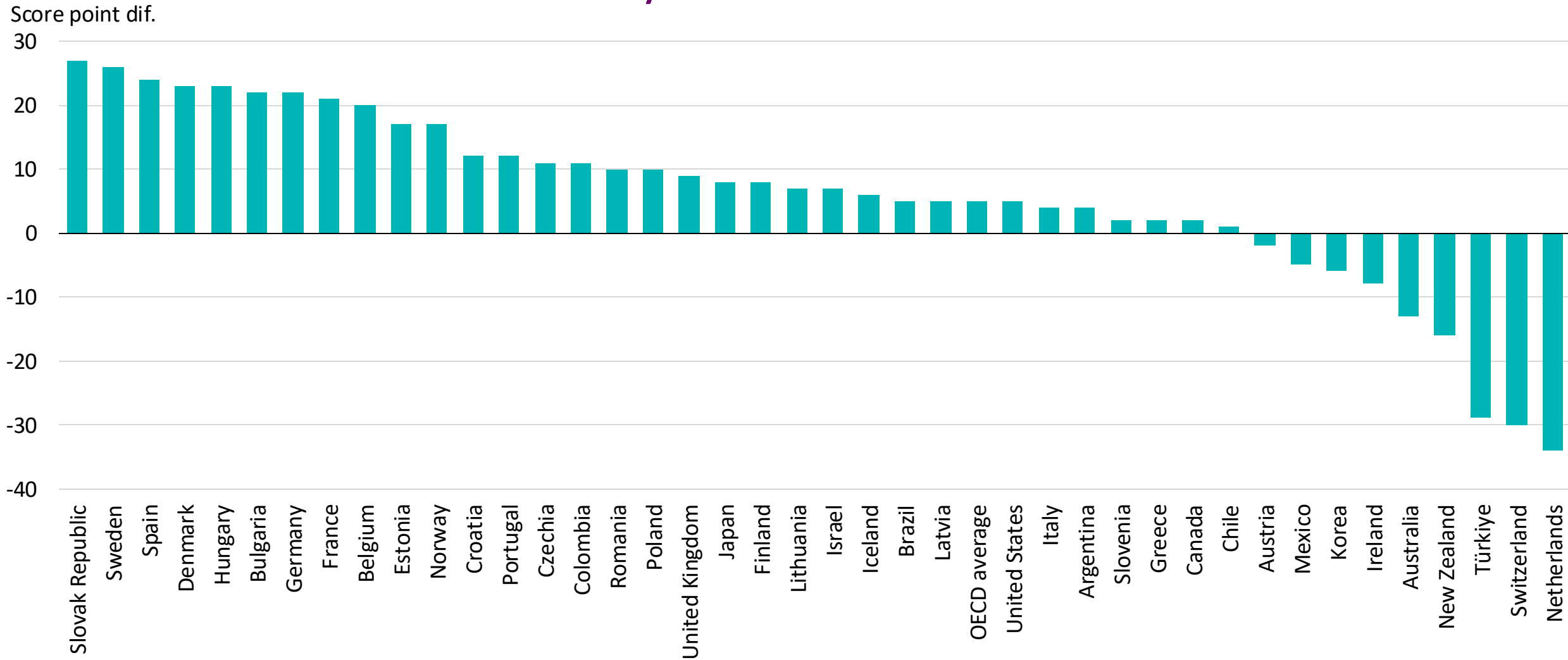
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Children who had attended ECEC tend to have higher PISA scores at age 15

PISA 2022 score-point differences in mathematics for 15-year-old students who attended more than two years of ECEC and those who attended less or none

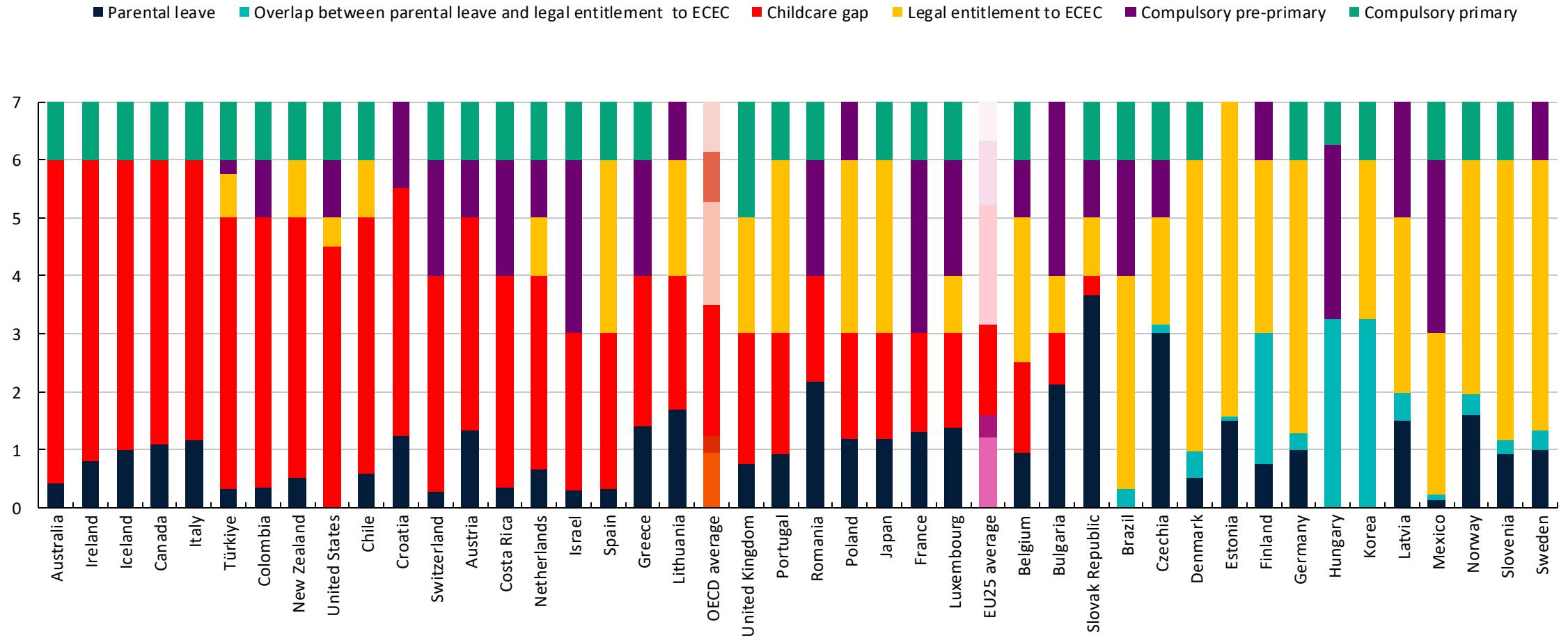




In many countries, there is a gap between the end of parental leave and the start of a child's entitlement to childcare or education

Figure B1.2

Childcare gap (2024)



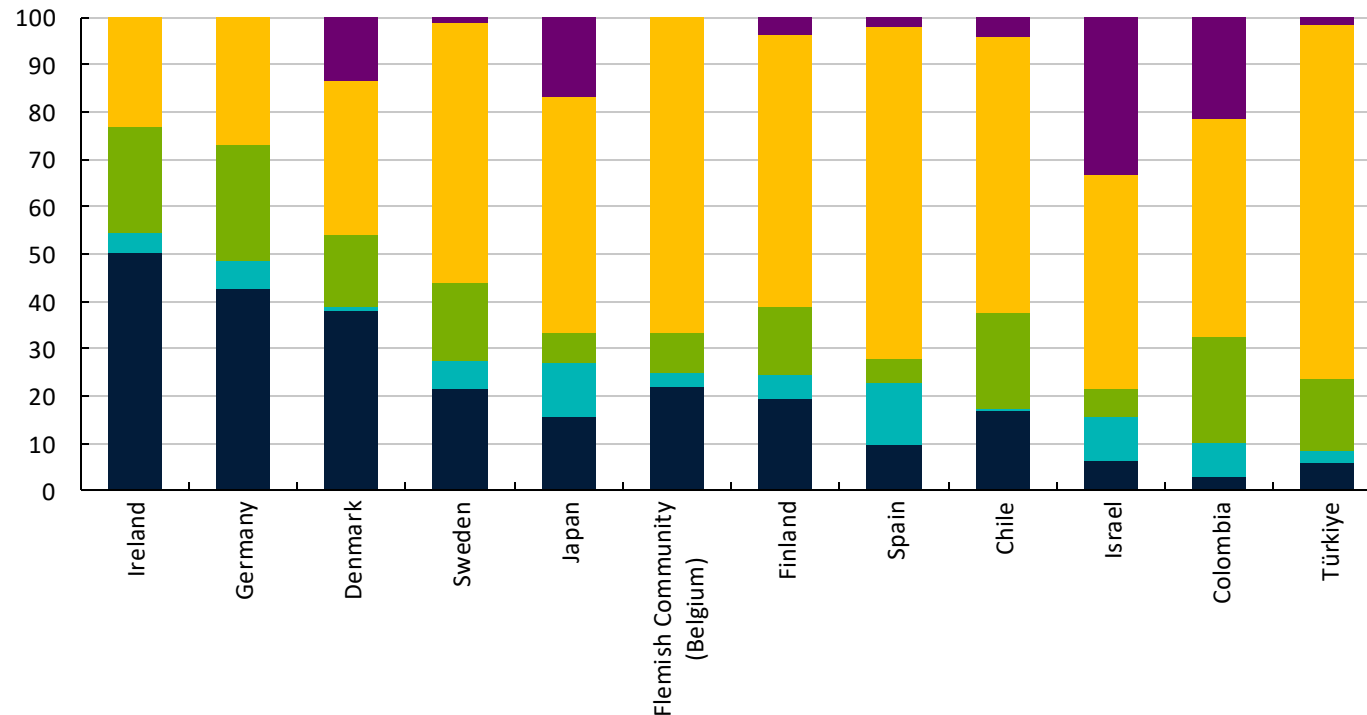


In some countries, waiting lists for early childhood education are common

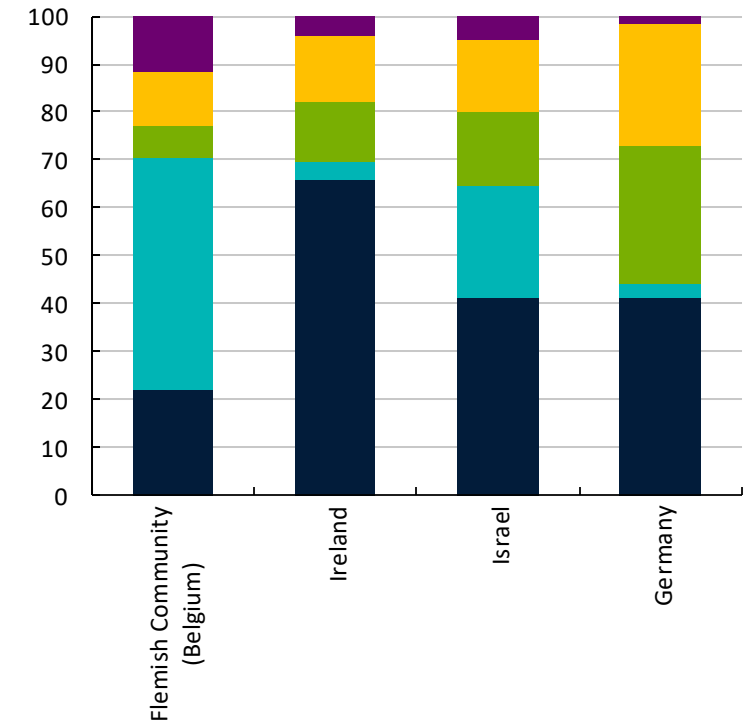
Share of early childhood education and care centres with children on waiting lists (2024)

- Children were placed on a waiting list and are still waiting for a place
- Children were placed on a waiting list and later enrolled
- There is no information
- Parents' demand unregistered (not placed on waiting list; outcome unknown)
- No children in these situations

Panel A: Pre-primary centres (ISCED 02)



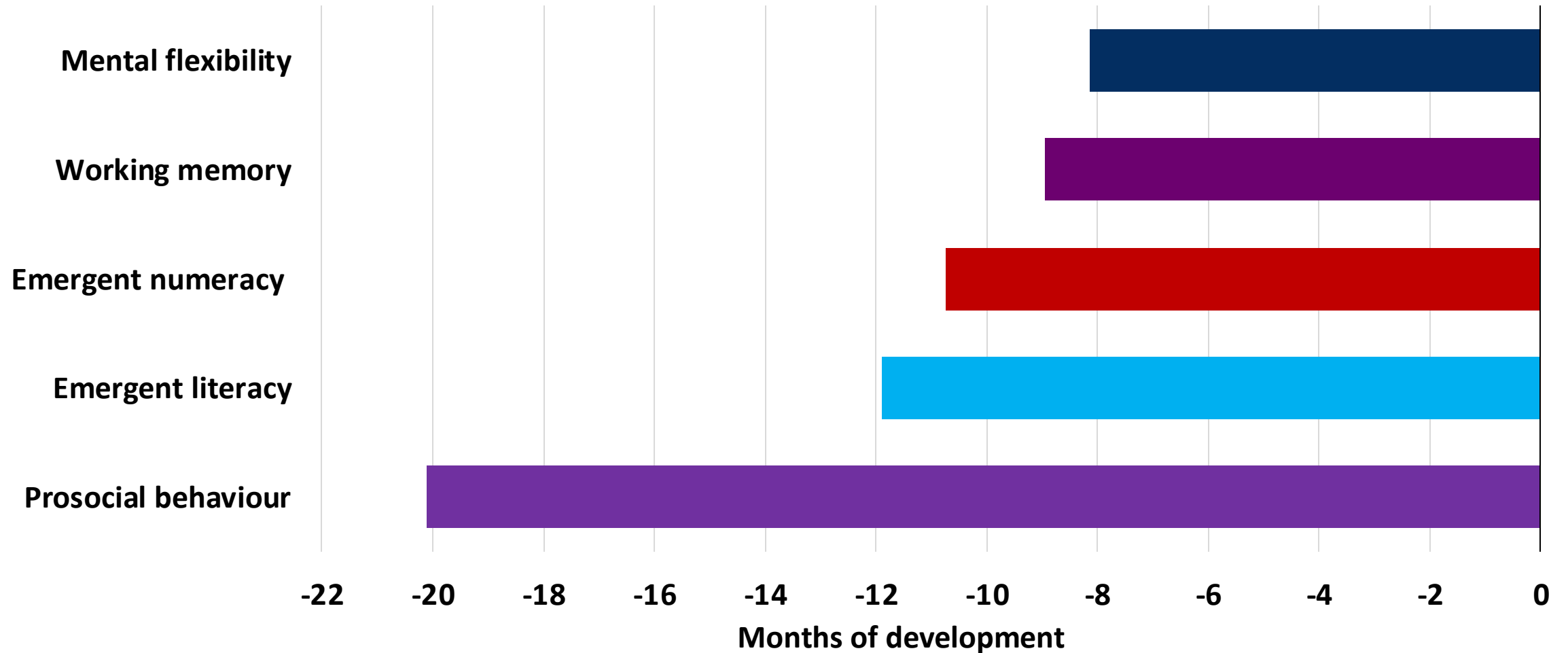
Panel B: Centres for children under age 3





Disadvantaged children face significant development gaps by age five

Development differences between disadvantaged and advantaged children, in months, 2020

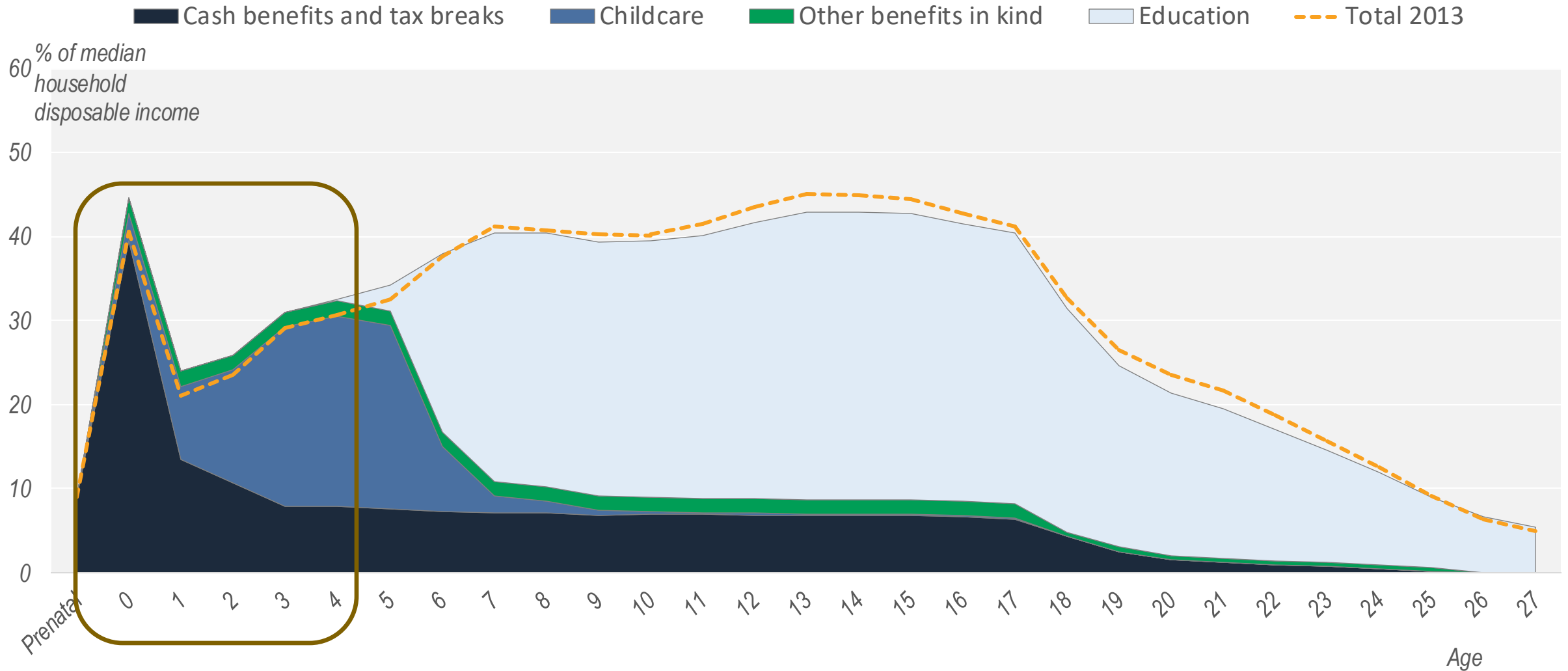




Combining investments more effectively

Figure 4.4

Public spending on family benefits and education, OECD average, 2019

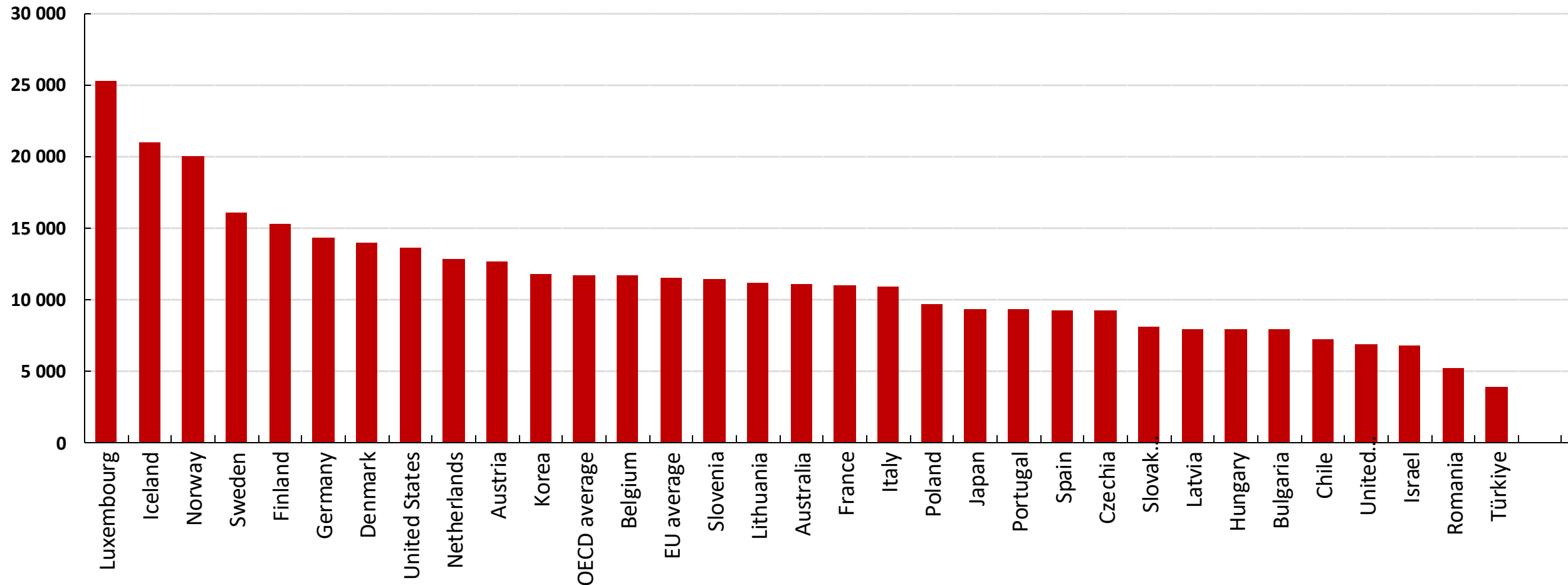




Investment per child varies widely

Expenditure per child in early childhood education (2021)

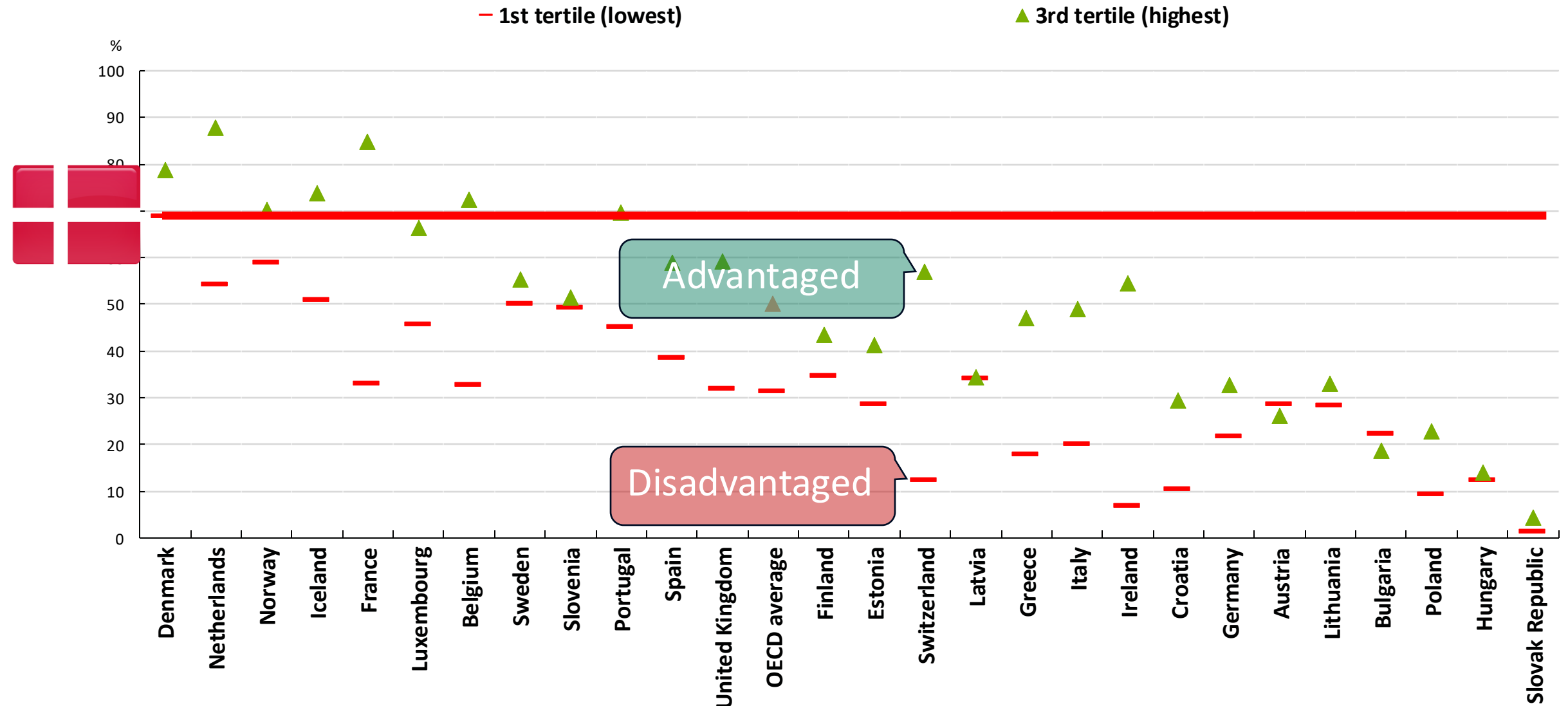
Pre-primary





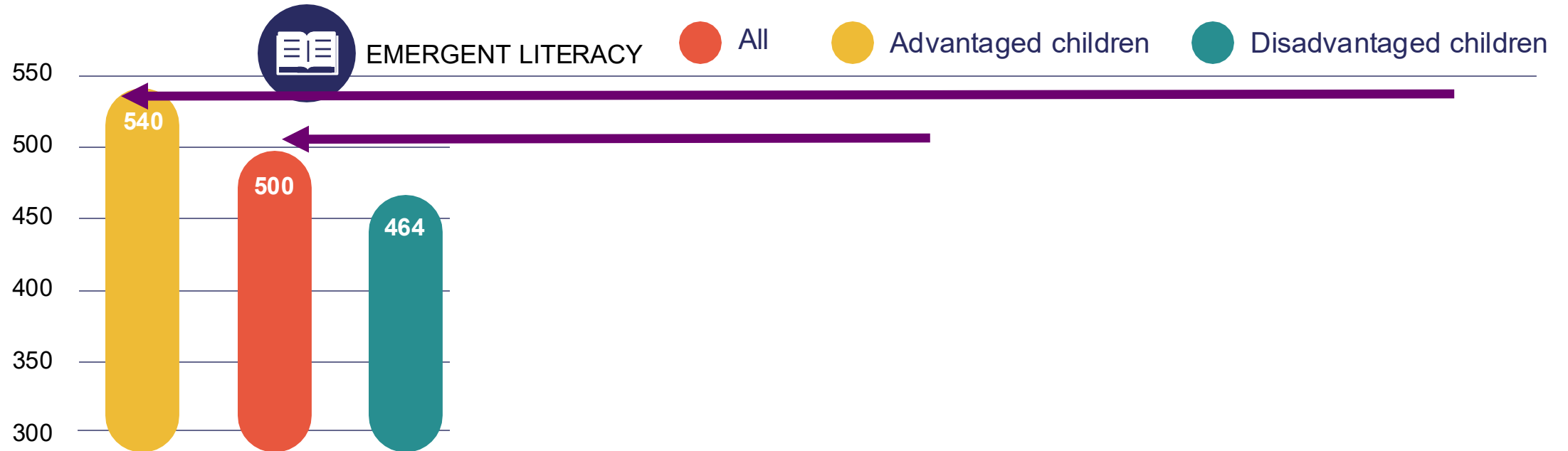
Children from wealthier families are generally more likely to be enrolled

Participation in early childhood education and care among 0-2 year-olds, by disposable income (2022)





Building resilience and early equity (5-year-olds)



5-year-olds are great promoters of early childhood education



- Children are overwhelmingly positive about their early learning environments.
- They like many things.
- Very few would prefer to be at home.

*"I like to do everything:
play, to do activities, to go
outside."*



What 5-year-old children like most in early childhood education...



Playing



**Making and
creating**



Learning



**Being
physically
active**



**Being with
their friends
and teachers**

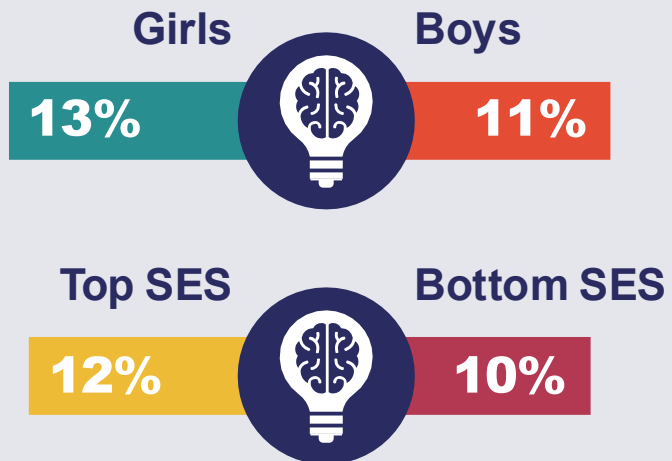


**Resting
and eating**



**Having choice
over what
they do**

Five-year-olds who mentioned enjoyment of learning:



Learning was the **3rd most popular** choice among five-year-olds.



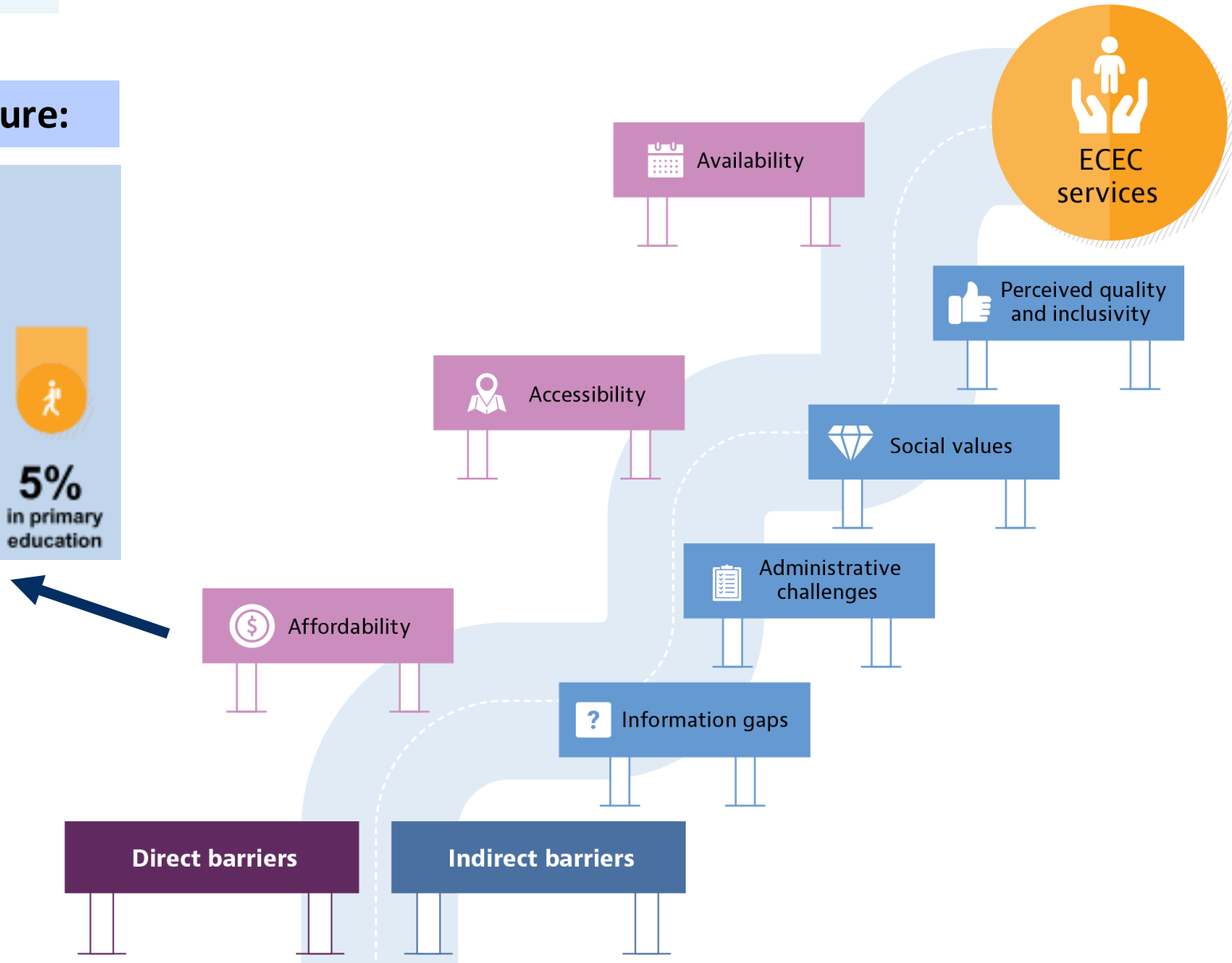
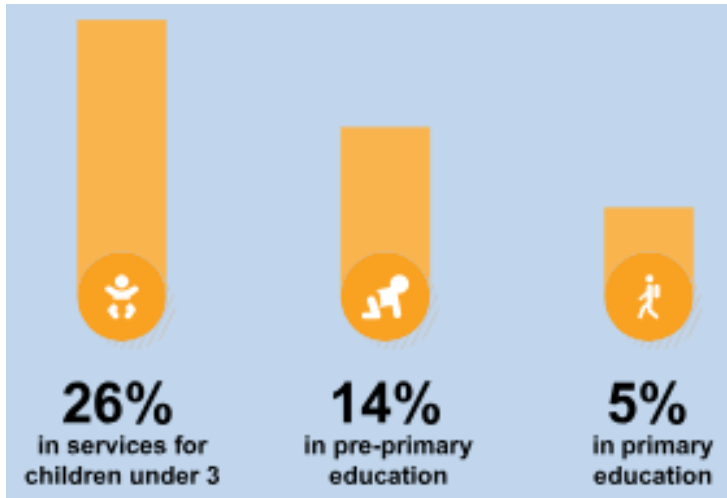
"Learning new complicated stuff because it's hard first then you get better and better."



Direct and indirect barriers to early childhood education need to be removed

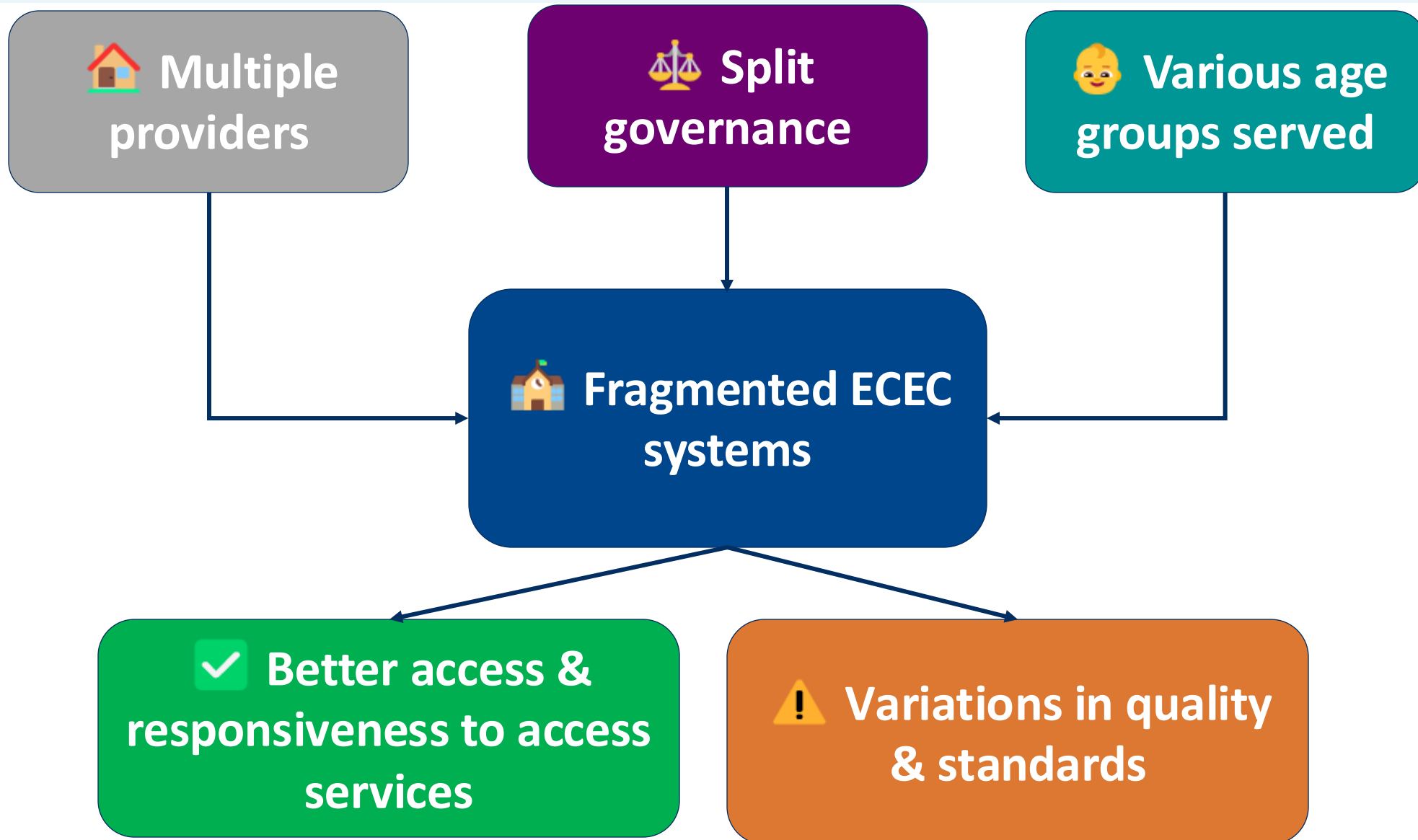
Figure 5.4

Share of private expenditure:





The childcare and education sector for children under age 3 is fragmented





Four key messages



1) Early Childhood

1

Expand access but prioritise quality that builds curiosity and self-regulation

2

Invest in educators' time, capability and continuous professional learning

3

Strengthen family engagement and cross-sector partnerships

4

Use digital tools to enrich exploration, not replace play-based and social interactions



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and remember:

Without data, you are just another person with an opinion

