



**educAzioni**

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# INVESTING IN CHILDREN: CARING FOR THE FUTURE, STARTING NOW.

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Reasons and proposals for extending the access and improving the quality of early child care and education for children 0 to 6 and of interventions to support responsive parenting.

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Alleanza per l'infanzia

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**Alleanza per l'Infanzia** (Alliance for children)<sup>1</sup>, in collaboration with the network **#EducAzioni** (EducActions)<sup>2</sup>, has developed a detailed proposal for using a significant proportion of Next Generation EU funds to extend the access and improve the quality of early child care and education for children 0 to 6 and of interventions to support responsive parenting. A summary is reported below.

### *Why investing in early education and parental support*

The European Commission, within the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020 Framework), acknowledges the crucial role of early education to provide all children, since their early infancy, with the skills needed to successfully address the challenges they will encounter during their entire life course, with priority to be given to the most vulnerable. The Next Generation EU Fund focuses, starting with its own name, on today's and tomorrow's children and includes education and equal opportunities for all among its priority objectives.

Investments in early education, preschool services and interventions to promote responsive parenting must be considered as investments in education as they provide children with the foundations for fully achieving their potential, thus preventing inequalities and educational poverty.

For all the above reasons, these investments are strategic from both a social and an economic perspective. A vast and increasing body of research shows that access to quality early education and parental support services produces sustained benefits on:

- 1. children's wellbeing and skills, with positive effects extending for their whole life course;**
- 2. families' wellbeing, by work-family conciliation for parents of young children, particularly mothers, thus supporting parental employment and consequently reducing child poverty, and by promoting fertility;**
- 3. social cohesion and economic development of local communities and the whole society.**

### *The situation in Italy*

Access to early education (0 to 3) services is unacceptably low in Italy: overall, access barely reaches 25%, including both services publicly provided - slightly over 12% - and those provided by the private, profit and non-profit, sector. Moreover, geographical and social disparities are dramatic: in the southern regions, where rates of child poverty and educational failure are higher, coverage is almost everywhere below 10%; children from poorer and lower educated parents are much less likely to attend ECEC services, thus excluding those who would get the greatest benefits.

Surveys show that an insufficient offer of publicly subsidized services which can be affordable by low-income families is a strong constraint, which adds to a scarce awareness of the benefits of an early education. The situation is far better for preschool (3 to 5) services, where coverage is almost 95%, and fees absent or very limited. However, enrolment is lower among children of migrant families, who therefore will encounter difficulties when entering the elementary school. Furthermore, although there are no differences in coverage, differences remain in the availability of fulltime schools, which are not always present in the Southern regions.

### *The proposal*

The document underlines the need to guarantee the **enforceable right to early education for all children**. Informed by these principles, it proposes to ensure, within 3 years (2021-23 period):

- a) a public provision of early (0 to 3) child care and education, funded by the general taxation, of at least 33% in each Region<sup>3</sup>, with services provided for free either directly from the public or by fully accredited and publicly funded entities. The long-term 10-year objective is to ensure universal right to early education services for this age bracket;
- b) a 95% coverage of free and full-time preschool education in all Regions for children 3 to 5 years old, with access to meals subsidized for needy families as recommended by the *Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia* (Guarantor for Children) and encouraging full inclusion of children of non-Italian citizenship.
- c) fully ensured and possibly further strengthened professional requisites of educators<sup>4</sup> and teachers, with adequate salaries and fair contractual terms and work conditions;
- d) thorough implementation of the *Poli per l'infanzia*<sup>5</sup>, as provided for Dlg. 65/2017 as coordination entities of all 0 to 6 educational services, including the *Centri per Bambini e Famiglie* (Centres for Children and Families<sup>6</sup>), which should be widely promoted.

### *Estimated costs*

In order to achieve a coverage of publicly provided early education services of at least 33% in all regions – which will mean adding further 298.848 childcare places to the 159.849 now available – it will be necessary a **capital cost investment of 4,8 billion euros**, a far larger sum of what is foreseen by the Government for the use of the Next generation EU Funds.

Infrastructural costs could be reduced by adapting and renovating buildings currently used by the *Scuole dell'infanzia*, which have seen a 16% reduction in the number of attending children due to decreased birth rate. By doing this, pedagogical coordination across whole 0 to 6 education system will also be facilitated.

**Recurrent costs will sum up**, for the same amount of added childcare places, **to 2,7 billion yearly** (the average recurrent cost is 9,195 euros/child/day). In order to cover the costs incurred annually by families and local municipalities, it will be necessary to spend further 1.325 billion/year.

The estimated cost of achieving universal access to full time preschool is 120 million euro, to which some further expense will be needed to partially reduce the cost of meals for families.

Indeed, it is a very significant investment. However, the returns are substantial not only for the benefits to children, their families and the whole society, but also because **it will create full-time equivalent jobs for 42.600 people**, which could be even more if a more favourable educator-to-child ratio than the current 1 to 7 will be pursued. The job creation achieved by extending full-time pre-school services to all children will be more limited (4751 teachers) as it will regard a much lower number of children.

The Next Generation EU Funds offer a unique opportunity to cover the infrastructural costs which are needed to achieve the 33% minimum coverage in all Italian Regions, while the recurrent costs will be covered by the ordinary tax revenues. The EU Structural Funds for cohesion policies 2021-2027 can play an adjunctive role with respect to ordinary financial resources and contribute to the funding of the 0 to 6 integrated education system, also considering that 5% of the European Social Fund (ESF) will have to be allocated to the foreseen Child Guarantee.

The full document (in Italian) can be found at [www.alleanzainfanzia.it](http://www.alleanzainfanzia.it)

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<sup>1</sup> Alleanza per l'Infanzia is a network of over 30 organizations including NGOs, academy, professional societies, trade unions and other Entities. Its main objective is to advocate for child- and family-friendly policies, based on three main pillars: universal access to early education, universal and progressive support to the income of families with children, and extension of parental leaves.

<sup>2</sup> EducAzioni is a large network of organizations engaged in improving access to and quality of public education services for all.

<sup>3</sup> In Italy there are 20 Regions and two Autonomous Provinces, with a rather large autonomy in several sectors, ranging from health to education. The regional coverage minimum was set to avoid that a satisfactory country average hides low coverage in some Regions.

<sup>4</sup> In Italy, educators are those employed in 0 to 3 services while from the 3-5 preschool services to secondary schools they are called teachers

<sup>5</sup> The legislative decree 65/2017 foresees a pedagogical continuity and structural integration between 0-3 services, which are now considered as part of the education system and have consequently been moved from ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education. The *Poli per l'Infanzia* are supposed to ensure this integration.

<sup>6</sup> The Centers for Children and Families are services where professional educators, who engage parents and their children in activities aimed at promoting early development and responsive caregiving, such as shared reading, play, art expression etc. In most instances their target is universal, in some other they address predominantly at-risk families. Currently, they cover a small percentage of the population, mainly in cities.