Early Childhood Policy in France

In 2006, with 830,900 births and a fertility rate of over 2 children per female, France ranks among the European countries where the most babies are born. Today there are over 4.8 million children under 6 years of age in France, 2.4 million of them are under three. The rate of employment of women of child-bearing age reached 80% and 60% of children under six are raised by couples in which both parents work.

Early childhood issues are at the core of French family policy. This sector accounts for 1% of the GNP and early childhood aid amounted to €10.2 billion in 2006. Early childhood funding is governed by the family section of the annual social security financing act. State support for early childhood aims to help people reconcile their professional life with family life, and is based on the principle of freedom of choice for families. This freedom of choice first means enabling parents to maintain, suspend or reduce their professional activity, and second providing a wide range of childcare possibilities so that families can choose the one that best meets their needs.

Early childhood policy in France has several components: child welfare, early childhood care and the payment of family benefits. It is reinforced by maternity and paternity leave, which is governed by the health insurance section of social security. It is also reinforced by the provision of education for children at three years of age, which is the responsibility of the national education system. Early childhood care and education are ensured by several types of structures mainly managed by the public sector.

The French model based on freedom of choice is different from Sweden’s system, the United Kingdom’s model and Germany’s system. The Swedish pro-equality model promotes equality between men and women in the workplace and the sharing of family responsibilities with significant public investment in infrastructures providing childcare services. Maternity and parental leave is shorter but paid at full salary. All children whose parents work or study have the right to a spot in a day care centre. The British non-interventionist system is characterised by a very few group facilities and by the government’s involvement in childcare only when parents cannot be entrusted with their
children’s care or who are in a precarious situation. The **German model** is based on the conventional idea of the family, only providing tax benefits for families with one income. The childcare system is not institutionalised until three years of age and onwards and the childcare structures such as schools are only open a half day, which most often obliges the women to work on a part-time basis.

French families have a larger and more diverse range of childcare options than families in other large European countries including Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.

### Maternity Leave – Paternity Leave

The **duration of maternity and paternity leave is defined by law** and allowances are equal to full pay and are paid by the national health insurance fund (Social Security Code, Book III, L. 330-1 et seq.).

**Women are entitled to a maternity leave of 16 weeks** for the first and second child, 26 weeks for the third child and 34 weeks if they have twins.

Since January 2002, **fathers can take a paternity leave of 11 consecutive days**, which is extended to 18 days in the case of multiple births.

In other countries:

• In Sweden, maternity leave is one year with 90% pay.
• In Germany, maternity leave is 14 weeks with full pay.
• In the United Kingdom, maternity leave is 18 weeks with 46% pay.

### Maternal and Child Health Services

Maternal and Child Health Services (Protection maternelle et infantile - PMI) are for families, pregnant women and children under six. They consist of measures for **medical prevention, psychological services, social and health education for future parents and their children**. They establish the **vaccination schedule** and develop measures to detect handicaps in children under six. **Departments** are responsible for organizing and financing maternal and child health services and consultations.

### Care for Children under Three Years of Age

**Early childhood care** is at the core of early childhood policy. It concerns children under six, but in practice mainly children under three. **Group care structures** represent a third of all childcare options with 317,000 spots. They include **day care centres** (group day care centres, family day care homes, parent-run day care centres), **drop-in day care centres, nursery schools and open structures** that offer different types of care in the same structure. The following **types of individual care** are also made available: care provided by a child minder at his or her home or the child’s home. Care at home by parents is also made possible by several types of parental leave paid in part.
A five-year Early Childhood Plan was undertaken in November 2006 to improve care options that are not sufficient to meet families’ needs. It aims to reach 350,000 childcare spots in 2008, encourage the creation of micro day care centres and day care centres in the workplace, offer the same quality of services throughout France and facilitate the recruitment of professional staff.

The distinguishing feature of group day care centres: A multidisciplinary team accommodates children in group day care centres run by municipalities, Departments or non-profit organizations. It comprises childcare aides, childcare workers, a psychologist under the management of children’s nurses and a paediatrician. Group childcare in day care centres is based on the respect of each child’s habits and the concern to create a secure and safe environment for the child by providing personalized care managed by a principal caregiver. A place of socialisation and learning, day care centres help promote equal opportunities.

### Different Types of Aid and Their Financing

Early childhood benefits (prestation d’accueil du jeune enfant - PAJE) group together the main types of direct aid paid by the Family Allowances Fund (Caisse d’allocations familiales - CAF) including childbirth allowances, standard allowances, supplements for childcare of the parents’ choice and supplements for the activity of the parents’ choice.

In addition to this financial support for families, the government provides assistance in kind that consist in organizing access to childcare services and equipping childcare structures. The various types of early childhood aid are financed by employers’ social contributions and the general welfare contribution (contribution social généralisée - CSG) and to a lesser extent by the State and local and regional government.

### Provision of Education for Children Aged Three to Six

Although it is voluntary, the 2.6 million children aged three to six all attend school in preschools. Some academic institutions accept children from the age of two, especially in underprivileged areas or in areas that have few early childcare structures. Preschool has always been one of the most innovative aspects of the French education system. Preschool aims to socialize children and prepare them for primary school. This pre-primary cycle comprises three classes: first year (petite section), second year (moyenne section) and third year (grande section) that are divided according to the students’ ages. It strives to respect children’s needs and biological rhythms without structuring time and teaching on the basis of games. Lessons are organized on the basis of five activities: language learning, living together, moving and expressing oneself with one’s body, discovering the world and artistic activities.

For comparative purposes, in other countries, children begin school at:
- six years of age in Sweden,
- three or four years of age in the United Kingdom,
- six years of age in Germany,
- three years of age in Spain.
To find out more

**Early Childhood Policy**

☞ *L’augmentation du nombre de naissances en France en 2006 et le succès du modèle français de politique familiale* (Increase in the number of births in France in 2006 and the success of the French model of family policy) [in French], Philippe Bas. - Council of Ministers article, 24 January. 2007


☞ *Mieux articuler vie familiale et vie professionnelle* (How to better combine family life with professional life) [in French]: report for the Prime Minister, Valérie Pécresse. - Prime Minister, February 2007, 80 pages.


☞ *Presentation of the Early Childhood Plan: press kit* [in French], Philippe Bas. Minister with responsibility for Social Security, the Elderly, People with Disabilities and the Family.

  http://www.famille.gouv.fr/doss_pr/plan_petite_enfance/dossier_de_presse.pdf


  http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/12/rapports/r3384-tIII.asp

☞ *Les modes de garde ou d'accueil des jeunes enfants de 0 à 6 ans* (Childcare options for children from 0 to six years of age), *Observatoire de l'enfance* in France. - *Le point sur...*, March 2005, no. 82, 4 pages.

  http://www.observatoiredeleenfance.org/pdf/Numero_82.pdf


Studies and Statistics

Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care, OCDE. - 2006, 7 pages.

Main early childhood indicators in France in English
http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/16/1/37423446.pdf


La conciliation entre vie familiale et vie professionnelle selon le niveau de vie des familles (Reconciling Family Life with Professional Life according to the Standard of Living of Families) [in French], Sophie Bressé, Direction de la recherche, des études, de l'évaluation et des statistiques (French Centre for Research, Studies, Evaluation and Statistics - DREES). - Etudes et résultats de la DREES, no. 465, February 2006, 12 pages.

Early Childhood Care in 2005: Statistical Data [in French], Early Childhood Observatory, November 2006.

Early childhood day-care in Europe, URBACT Programme instigated by the European Union that aims to share experiences in urban policy, March 2005: summary of early childhood care options (legal frameworks, the government’s involvement).

Maternal and Child Health Services

http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/074000139/index.shtml?xtor=EPR-
**Preschool**

  [http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid166/l-ecole-maternelle.html](http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid166/l-ecole-maternelle.html)

- Preschools and Primary Schools in France - National Education Ministry Website, October 2006.  

- Presentation of foreign education systems (see the pre-primary education heading).  