



Summary of key issues from previous UPR cycles

In previous cycles of the Universal Periodic Review, **early childhood care and access to childcare services have never been specifically addressed**. However, these services are directly related to the economic, social and cultural rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in particular the right to development, education and equal opportunities from an early age.

Early childhood services are crucial for supporting families, preventing poverty and reducing inequalities. They also are essential means to support families, particularly women. **Their omission in previous cycles contrasts with the importance recognised by international and European institutions** for ensuring effective social inclusion and optimal child development.

National framework

Early childhood care in Belgium remains insufficiently structured and funded, with significant inequalities in access depending on socioeconomic background and family profile. In 2023, around 56% of children under the age of 3 attended a formal childcare service, but **this rates falls around 20% for children at risk of poverty**, compared with around 59% for privileged children. The most disadvantaged municipalities are particularly affected : these are the ones where needs are the highest, but where coverage rates remain the lowest.

In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the situation is deteriorating further with cuts in the number of spots, staff shortages, and a lack of attractiveness of training courses. **However, efforts are being made** : in Flanders, fundings and projects have created thousand of spots, with investments planned for 2025-2029, but access remains the weakest for disadvantaged children whose mothers are not of Belgian origin ($\approx 36\%$).

These findings limit the effective exercise of children's rights and exacerbate inequalities from early childhood onwards, while going against European ambitions : the Barcelona targets, updated in 2022, set an overall coverage rate of 45% by 2030. Furthermore, the current limitations of parental leave - insufficient duration and financial compensation - prevent many disadvantaged and single-parent families from benefiting from it, which increases pressure on childcare services and limits support for parenting. **These findings reinforce the need for additional measures, such as extending birth leave to 6 months per parent, to promote gender equality and support families.**

Challenges and impact

The main challenges have direct consequences for children and their families:

- Limited access to early childhood care, with low coverage rates for children under 3, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds ;
- Variable quality of services, linked to a shortage of qualified staff and non-compliance with staffing standards ;
- Regional and socio-economic inequalities, which increase the risk of social exclusion from early childhood onwards ;



- Pressure on families and non-take-up of services, exacerbated by administrative complexity and the cost of spots;
- Effects amplified by the decline of social policies, particularly for caring or vulnerable parents, leading to indirect impacts on children's development and well-being;
- Impact on emotional and cognitive development, early learning and long-term equal opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Extend parental leave to 6 months per parent, in order to support parenthood, gender equality, and reduce pressure on childcare services.**
- **Increase the coverage rate for childcare places for children aged 0 to 3, aiming for at least 50% across the country, through targeted public funding that takes into account poverty and single-parent situations.**
- **Improve the financial, geographical, and inclusive accessibility of services for all children, especially the most vulnerable.**
- **Enhance and stabilize early childhood professions with sustainable funding, professional training, and attractive working conditions.**

Online file :

<https://lacode.be/projet/upr-2026-factsheets/>



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This fact sheet is part of a series of fact sheets written on the situation of children's rights in Belgium for information purposes in the context of Belgium's Periodic Review. Their drafting was coordinated by CSOs and NHRIs that are members of a working group on the UPR, led by the National Commission for Children's Rights.