



# Enhancing Quality in Family Day Care

A peer learning project

## Final Learning Report

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# Enhancing Quality in Family Day Care

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The Erasmus + project “Enhancing Quality in Family Day Care” is funded by the European Union and led by Early Childhood Ireland.

Four organisations partnered on the implementation, including Aarhus Universitet (Denmark), Vernieuwing In De Basisvoorzieningen Voor Jonge Kinderen - VBJK (Belgium) and Vlaams Welzijnsverbond (Belgium).



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## Why a project on Family Day Care?

In most EU countries there are two types of ECEC services: 1) group- and centre-based services, and 2) family day care in childminders' homes. Each type has its own strengths; each type has its own challenges. In the *Quality in Family Day Care (QualFDC)* project, partners from Belgium, Denmark and Ireland focused on the family day care system in their countries.

The Qual FDC partners all believe in the possible added value of family day care and worked together aiming to realise children's right to high-quality services. We learned that though our systems differed, there were some similar challenges: the recruitment and retention of childminders, a low qualified workforce, and challenges in delivering national and regional/local governance and management that support families' access to family day care services and also develop consistently good quality practice.

## Project goal

There is a need for more visibility on family day care. It is a rather invisible field in research and policy, and there is limited transnational cooperation on this subject. Therefore, the aim of the QualFDC project was to extend research, practice and policy by exchanging findings and interesting practices on family day care in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark and Ireland .

This peer learning project explored partners' examples of interesting and effective policies and implementation in family day care governance and management systems. We focused on workforce professionalisation and development, and recruitment and retention strategies to strengthen the provision of accessible, affordable, high-quality family day care in the EU.

This goal was achieved through three three-day Learning, Teaching and Training Activities (**LTTAs**) in Belgium, Denmark and Ireland. Each LTTA comprised a programme of visits to centres and childminding settings, presentations by and discussions with policymakers and national and local agencies and stakeholders concerned with family day care access and quality development. In the QualFDC project we also developed three country profile reports and reflection reports from each LTTA and this overarching report and related video.

## Context

The QualFDC partners operate in European countries/regions that are in varying stages in the development and implementation of integrated national and regional/local ECEC systems, including family day care. Each country has different histories, structures, systems and laws. Yet, despite the differing ECEC contexts and family day care models, the QualFDC partners are aware that there are also commonalities.

The aim of this final reflection document is not to 'judge': each country has its own context, strengths and challenges. The aim is to provide an overall reflection, taking a helicopter view.



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We aim to stimulate reflection, to start and to continue the debate on family day care to inspire practice, research and policy in the EU<sup>1</sup>.

### What are possible strengths of family day care services?

Through the cooperation and the joint reflections, the QualFDC-partners identified that family day care has specific ‘characteristics’ that are valued (when high quality and necessary preconditions are met).

In general, family day care has the possibility of being a **small-scale** ECEC service, with a **home- and family-feeling**. If it’s of high quality, this can have a positive influence on children. The ‘break’ between their own family and family day care can therefore be smaller. It has the possibility of starting from a ‘real world pedagogy’ if the children take part in family life. If the groups are small in family day care, the childminders can potentially be **sensitive** and responsive to the needs of children and develop **rich interactions** with children starting from an educare approach. Hence, if the family day care has a high quality, children will receive the attention they need, and can grow at their own pace. For **parents**, a small scale can be beneficial as well; a relationship with one professional is maybe easier, leading to a reciprocal and trustworthy relationship.

Next, family day care services can be more **accessible** in communities where a centre-based service is not available or not feasible, which can be the case **in rural areas and villages**.

### What are potential pitfalls of family day care services?

QualFDC partners also identified potential pitfalls in the family day care model.

Family day care services are often run by one childminder alone in their own house. The main pitfall is the **loneliness and isolation** in which childminders work. First, this implies that the work can be quite demanding: they have to do everything: providing a rich environment for the children, but also many organisational and practical tasks. Next, the solitude also implies that they don’t have a team of colleagues with whom they can exchange ideas, reflect on their daily practice, new innovative practices or discuss certain worries or questions they have.

Childminders are often **low qualified**. Previously, qualifications were seen as ‘not needed’, as it was assumed that everybody can take care of children. This perception has changed: high quality childcare is more than guarding children. It is about providing rich interactions with each child, developing a rich playing, learning and caring environment, and setting up reciprocal relations with parents. Family day care should not only pay attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the QualFDC project and the LTTAs, please check the country reports and reflection reports, <https://projects.au.dk/qualfdc>



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economical function of childcare, but also to providing pedagogical and social functions. This demands qualified and supported staff. However, often a **support system for all childminders is lacking** in national systems.

There are also some potential pitfalls **for children and families**. As family day care is small scale, there may be fewer peers for children to play with, to grow up with. Next, the transition from home to family day care might be 'warmer', but the transition from family day care to compulsory education might be more difficult. For the parents, a small scale service might have some pitfalls as well. What happens if the childminder is sick, on holidays, or is on training? Or what happens if the relationship between the parents and the childminder is not trustful and reciprocal? Which alternatives do the parents have?

Finally, for the family of the childminder, the job of the childminder can have a huge impact on their daily life: there are toys all over the house, there are always children and parents coming into the private lives of the childminders' spouse and own children.

### What are necessary preconditions for family day care?

In order for family day care services to become a high quality ECEC setting, some preconditions should be met.

First, attention should be paid to the **qualifications, training and support** of the childminders. As they are working in isolation, and daily reflection with a colleague or leader is lacking, this is crucial. There is a clear demand for a supportive structure for childminders. This is needed to support their self-reflection process in daily practice with all children, parents and their social role in society; to support their ideas on inclusion and diversity; to support their innovative capacity; and to support their own policy making capacity.

Next, high quality family day care demands clear **policy choices and political will** to support the governance and funding of family day care services. This implies **good working conditions** with decent and fair payment, working hours, pension, insurance and other essential conditions.

Small group sizes and a limited number of children per adult are also crucial preconditions. The **adult-child ratio** has an influence on the children. For example, if there are too many children per adult, caring and eating moments become automatic actions. Children may then lack a warm relationship with the childminder, or won't have time to go outside, or play with their childminders. If there are too many children, the childminder's role becomes more of a 'guarding-role'. Each child should be seen, heard and receive the right attention, from a warm, sensitive, responsive educare approach. The adult-child ratio also affects the childminder's job satisfaction and workload. If the adult-child ratio is too high, the job becomes too demanding



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- albeit almost impossible - which is not the ideal situation if the job of childcare practitioner should be more attractive.

High quality family day care also implies the need for a **national quality framework** that clearly defines what high and inclusive quality ECEC should look like and which **self-evaluation and external evaluation systems** should be in place.

This all demands a competent system with sufficient public funding.

### Inspiration from the 3 countries

We saw many similarities between the QualFDC countries in visions and values on how to create high-quality early childhood education and care. We also saw similarities in how this is done in everyday practice. And we discovered similarities in creating conditions that promote children's needs, wellbeing, learning and growing. For example, in the three countries **play** is considered as a vital part of a happy and rich childhood and that children learn and grow through play. Also, rich interactions and relationships with adults that are sensitive to children's needs and expressions were considered important in the three QualFDC countries.

There are, of course, also differences<sup>2</sup>. These differences supported the reflection- and inspiration process in the QualFDC-project. In the next part, we describe some of those inspirational thoughts in the three QualFDC countries.

In **Flanders** (Belgium) the pedagogical framework stresses the importance of childcare for children, families and society. This is not a separate document for centre-based services and family day care. Instead it is one guiding document for both types of services. In Flanders, family day care is clearly regulated. They are inspected, and, recently, there is a support structure for family day care. The benefits of this support structure were discussed during the QualFDC project with childminders during visits to their homes and in dialogue with local non-profit agencies that provide the support structure. Agencies provide a consistent approach to coaching for **pedagogical support on the floor**, stimulating the reflection and practice of childminders, and illustrating the importance of a trusting and positive relationship between coaches/mentors and childminders. That a pedagogical coach supports within the home of the childminder, was an important source of inspiration. Coaches can support and develop childminders' practice in their real life context and during a work day.

In **Denmark** the **play groups** we visited during the LTTA were a source of inspiration. The play groups are groups of approximately 5-7 childminders who work together weekly with 'their'

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<sup>2</sup> The aim of this reflection report is not to judge the systems in the different countries but to identify and learn from inspiring elements in the family day care systems in the three partner countries and to share these reflections with stakeholders, and national, regional and local policymakers.



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children. They come together in a central location in their community, with a rich indoor and outdoor play environment. This location is provided and maintained by the local authority. So, once a week parents bring their children to the playgroups, instead of the childminder's home.

These play groups have an added value for the children: they can play together and get to know other children and childminders. They can play in a different environment. Furthermore, if a childminder is out (due to sick leave, holidays, continuous professional development, etc) children can go to the home of a 'guest childminder', who is one of the 5-7 childminders. If that happens, the parents and children know their 'guest childminder' and 'guest peers' already. The play groups also have a positive impact on the childminders. They are less isolated, they can 'learn' from each other in a more informal way, and have an opportunity for team reflection, social control. And they also know the 'guest children' and 'guest parents'. These play groups are also an opportunity for the pedagogical coach: they are present during the play group moments and can support the childminders by 'leading by practice' and support team reflection. The coach (employed by the local authority) also monitors the wellbeing, involvement, and development of the children, and support the childminder if needed. If the childminders or parents have questions, they can also refer and collaborate with other preventive family support services in the community.



Also in **Ireland** the QualFDC partners got inspired. Previously, it was possible that a childminder in Ireland would work her whole life all alone, without seeing any supportive or oversight agency. Currently, family day care in Ireland operates in a 'grey zone'. It is assumed that there are 52,775 children with childminders in Ireland (counted in Census 2022 for the



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first time), with 74 childminders regulated. This indicates the scale of the challenge ahead to engage, regulate and support the family day care sector.

Recently, the Irish government decided to regulate and support the family day care system. National policymakers are implementing **Ireland's first National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028**, developed through extensive stakeholder consultation, including childminders. The Plan's vision includes that children, families and communities of Ireland can experience the benefits of quality childminding in a relationship-based, home-from-home, family life environment and the life-learning, continuity of care. The flexibility that quality childminding could provide is acknowledged. Also, an appropriate quality assurance system that enhances family day care is developed.

During the QualFDC project, Ireland was in the process of developing the legal and administrative regulation for childminders. This is a foundational first stage of an incremental and supportive pathway to a regulated and supported sector. A **National Childminding Coordinator** is assigned to drive the Plan's implementation within the government department, guided by a national Steering Committee that includes childminders and national agencies concerned with regulation, evaluation, and support. The Plan is being implemented, starting from the strengths and specificities of the family day care sector, taking into account the pace and rhythm of the sector.



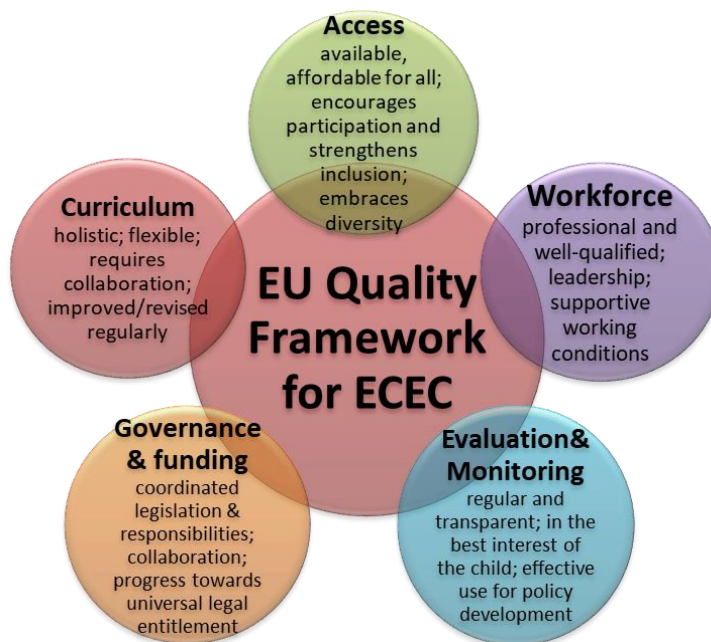
Main lessons learned from the QualFDC project





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No matter which setting, there are crucial conditions for the achievement of high-quality ECEC. These conditions are described in the European Commission's European Quality Framework<sup>3</sup>.



Source: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(01\)&rid=4](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&rid=4)

In this final reflection report we offer some specific conditions learned throughout the QualFDC-project.

First, we stress the importance of small groups and the **adult-child ratio**. In small groups, professionals can develop a secure attachment with each child, can have rich interactions, can support peer playing, and can provide a rich, stimulating environment starting from an educare approach. In small groups, childcare workers can take time to provide support to parents and reach for reciprocal, trusting relationships with parents and families. The adult-child ratio does not only have an impact on the children and the parents, it also makes the childminders' work feasible, leading to less dropout, which is important in coping with the current battle of staff shortages.

Second, we stress the **importance of a qualified and supported workforce**. This is crucial in ECEC in general, but even more for family day care, as childminders often work alone all day. Childminders should be perceived as professionals - as childminding is more than just guarding children. Childminders should become reflective practitioners, who are aware of their pedagogical and social role to children, families and society. Therefore, well-qualified staff is needed. Additionally, there should be a high-quality support structure around the

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<sup>3</sup> The main lessons we would like to stress in this final reflection report apply both to ECEC in general and to the field of family day care specifically.



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childminders. This can take different forms: a pedagogical coach who supports the childminder on the work floor during daily practice, and professional learning communities facilitated by a coach who supports reflective practice between different childminders. Also, good **working conditions** should be in place, including feasible working hours and decent payment. A high-quality **evaluation system**, based on self-evaluation and external evaluation is also needed to support childminders.

Third, we stress the **specificity of family day care services**. We do not suggest that family day care is better or worse than group-based childcare services (or vice versa). If both types are of high quality, parents can decide which type they prefer for their child and themselves. Nevertheless, family day care can have certain specificities that some parents might prefer. For example, in family day care children are part of the everyday life of the childminder, in their home environment; it starts from an authentic and small-scale pedagogical environment.

Lastly, a **competent system** is needed. This demands **political will**. Some policymakers believe that family day care can be an easy and cheap solution. This is not the case. To be of high quality, sufficient funding and governance is needed.

### And finally, a word of thanks

To conclude this final reflection, we would like to express our gratitude to all QualFDC partners and everyone involved in the three LTTAs. Through the three LTTAs, visits, discussions, and meetings, we broadened and deepened our view on family day care. This is valuable for research, practice and policymakers in the ECEC field in general and family day care specifically.

Finally, a special thanks to the European Union and the Erasmus+ Programme, and the Irish National Agency Léargas for making this learning exchange possible.