

**BIG MEETING 2.0 – FIRST YEARS COUNT!
WHAT’S NEXT?**



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Conclusions

This event, which brings together all the partners of the **PRIMEIROS ANOS A NOSSA PRIORIDADE CAMPAIGN**¹, took place two years after the first one (held in September 2021) with the following aims:

- A** Take stock of the implementation of the proposals for action for Portugal that emerged from the 1st Big Meeting
- B** Reflect on the Portuguese population perceptions of the importance of early childhood development and its inhibiting and promoting factors
- C** Identify the set of challenges to which it is now important to find/prioritise the right responses, in order to create the conditions, and mobilise everyone, to address them.

¹ This campaign is part of the European campaign FIRST YEARS FIRST PRIORITY, a joint initiative of Eurochild and ISSA (the International Step by Step Association) in which the European Public Health Alliance and Roma Education Fund are associate partners. This campaign is running in 11 European countries (Bulgaria, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain).



Take stock of the implementation of the proposals for action for Portugal that emerged from the 1st Big Meeting

We realised that:

1st. There has been progress in the political discourse (policy commitments and measures), showing a strong alignment with the actions proposed by the Campaign in Sep/2021, namely:

- The National Strategy Against Poverty (ENCP - *Estratégia Nacional de Combate à Pobreza*), approved in Dec/2021, in which children are considered a priority segment (Axis 1).
- The Child Guarantee National Action Plan (Gpl - *Garantia para a Infância*) seeks answers in the areas of housing, education, health and nutrition, by creating Local Action Centres.
- The ENCP Action Plan, approved in 12/10/2023 and publicly presented in 17/10/2023.
- The Decent Work Agenda (approved in April 2023) which strengthens measures to reconcile work-and family life, particularly in terms of parental leave, measures to combat job insecurity and extends the coverage of labour schemes such as remote and part-time work to informal carers.
- An inter-ministerial working group (between the Ministries of Education and Labor, Solidarity and Social Security) has been set up to define: i) pedagogical guidelines for 0 -3 years children; ii) quality benchmarks for crèches.
- The existence of a Family Fostering model, supported by scientific evidence, and a national campaign promoted by the Social Security Institute, which aims to guide and stimulate the attraction of foster families for children who have been removed or deprived of their biological family.

- The announced ambition for the country to adopt a Plan to Qualify the Promotion and Protection System, with targets up to 2030.
- 2nd. Measures have been taken to promote free childcare and an effort has been made to expand the crèches' network, but national coverage stands at around 53%².
- 3rd. Despite the progress made in promoting family foster care, the percentage of children in family based alternative care is still only 3,6%³.
- 4th. There has been no progress in providing disaggregated statistics for 0 - 5-year-olds in any dimension⁴.



Reflect on the Portuguese population perceptions of the importance of early childhood development and its inhibiting and promoting factors

The results of two studies carried out in 2023 at the initiative of the Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso Foundation were presented. These studies aimed to ascertain the perceptions of the Portuguese about the importance of the first years of life, with a view to identifying the information/knowledge gaps that should be prioritised in upcoming dissemination/training actions.

² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/portugal/access> (accessed in 22/10/2023).

³ Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. (2023). *CASA 2022 - Relatório de Caracterização Anual da Situação de Acolhimento das Crianças e Jovens*, p. 5.(available in <https://www.seg-social.pt/documents/10152/13200/Relatório+CASA+2022/c1d7359c-0c75-4aae-b916-3980070d4471>).

⁴ In the country profile of the ECD Countdown 2030 (promoted in collaboration between several academic organisations, including United Nations agencies and the World Bank, and with the current purpose of monitoring progress in the various countries in terms of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in the areas of Maternal and Child Health) Portugal continues to show an almost total lack of data in all indicators - <https://nurturing-care.org/portugal-2021/> (accessed in 22/10/2023).

1st. From the study carried out by ISAVE, which gauged the perceptions of the population of the city of Lisbon (a representative sample), the following stand out:

- a. That 90% or more of people think that, as a country, more importance should be given to child development, but only 35% realise that the period between the ages of 0 and 3 is when the brain develops the most.
- b. 80% of people rely on crèches to "look after" children and only 58% recognise their educational role.
- c. Only 5,7% of people think that crèches and kindergartens contribute to a healthy and happy childhood, although 90% highlight as favourable factors for early childhood development the time: i) dedicated by parents; ii) spent playing with other children.
- d. 68% recognise that children's illnesses have an impact on their health in adulthood, but the majority (55%) say that it takes too long to get to a specialist's appointment.
- e. 1/3 of the population has no idea what the most suitable environment is for a child deprived of their biological family.

2nd. From the study carried out by ISPA, which gauged perceptions at a national level (non-representative sample, with most of the population having a high level of education), the following stand out:

- a. 89% of respondents believe that the early years have an impact on social relationships, physical and mental health and future school performance.
- b. The vast majority believe that a child's emotional relationship with their parents can strongly influence their development process.
- c. However, 84% believe that poverty can have a negative (or even very negative) influence on child development.

- d. Most respondents consider that institutionalisation negatively influences early childhood development. However, 20% say that being placed in an institution offers positive family experiences.
- e. The majority of respondents believe that children take time to develop attachments, so frequent changes of carers have a negative impact. They advocate that 3.41; 5.25 and 7.82 is the number of children, per group, for an adult to look after appropriately, respectively of babies (0-12 months), 1-3 and 3-6 years-olds, for 10 hours a day.
- f. Most respondents agree:
 - i) with paid parental leave;
 - ii) that the mother or father should stay with the child during the first year of life;
 - iii) that the State should support financially all families so that children can attend quality crèches and kindergartens.
- g. And defend measures to make working hours more flexible, the adoption of remote work and the provision of childcare services in the workplace as necessary (albeit insufficient) conciliation measures.
- h. 80,5% consider waiting times to access primary healthcare centres and crèches to be inadequate (or very inadequate).
- i. The group of respondents with lower levels of education value less the importance of:
 - i) the experiences in the early years;
 - ii) playing;
 - iii) the need to respond adequately to the baby's needs; and shows lower levels of satisfaction with health and education services and higher values in terms of the need for support from the State.



Identify the set of challenges to which it is now important to find/prioritise the right responses, in order to create the conditions, and mobilise everyone, to address them.

During the Big Meeting 2.0 it was also noted that:

- 1st. there are 82.000⁵ children under the age of 6 living in poverty and/or social exclusion and that the target set for 2030 in the ENCP is to halve monetary poverty among children and young people.
- 2nd. the intensity of poverty is particularly serious for around half of children in single-parent families or families with 3 or more children.
- 3rd. there is no specific data on children's access to health, but that it has been established⁶ that families in the lower socio-economic brackets have greater difficulties in acquiring medicines, accessing a family doctor, and travelling to an emergency service.
- 4th. the access to pre-conception consultations and pregnancy monitoring and the necessary tests, particularly in the first and second trimesters (and especially in the Lisbon and Tagus Valley region)⁷, is not being ensured in accordance with the law and the monitoring programmes defined for this purpose by the Directorate-General for Health.
- 5th. there is no consolidated or territorialised data on health in terms of the public+private+solidarity offer to which citizens have access. Despite the constitutionally enshrined right to health, it is not possible to ascertain the respective levels of effective coverage. There is also no data on adherence to health promotion and disease prevention programmes and their impact.

⁵ Rodrigues, Carlos Farinha (see [session presentation](#))

⁶ Barros, Pedro Pita e Santos, Carolina (see [session presentation](#))

⁷ Campos, Ana (see [session presentation](#))

6th. the national coalition⁸ has already carried out more than 150 awareness-raising/training/reflection/knowledge dissemination actions in the period between March 2021 and October 2023, with important collaborative dynamics underway, such as the Pact for Childhood launched by PROCHILD-COLAB⁹.

Aware of all this, these are the

Main Challenges 2023

to which it is still important to respond with a sense of urgency:

1st The effective implementation on the field of the political commitments already made (with adequate and consistent budgeting), particularly at the level of the ENCP and the Child Guarantee. In particular, we would like to highlight the materialisation, at local level, of effective access, in time, to quality education and health care for all children aged 0 to 6, with the aim of breaking the transgenerational cycle of poverty.

⁸ The national coalition of the PRIMEIROS ANOS. A NOSSA PRIORIDADE campaign has the following partners (representing more than 2.500 organisations): Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso; Comissão Nacional de Promoção dos Direitos e Proteção das Crianças e Jovens; Instituto de Apoio à Criança; Confederação Nacional das Instituições de Solidariedade; União das Misericórdias Portuguesas; UNICEF Portugal; Fundação Brazelton/Gomes-Pedro; Fundação do Gil; Associação de Estabelecimentos de Ensino Particular e Cooperativo; Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância; Fundação Aga Khan Portugal; Associação Nacional de Intervenção Precoce; Cáritas Portuguesa; Associação Protectora da Primeira Infância; Obras Sociais de Viseu; Caminhos da Infância; Umbilical; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens de Oeiras; Fundação Bissaya Barreto; Escola Superior de Enfermagem de Lisboa; ISPA – Instituto Universitário de Ciências Psicológicas, Sociais e da Vida; Direção-Geral da Educação; Prochild CoLab; Colégio Origami; Sistema Nacional de Intervenção Precoce na Infância; Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Melgaço; ABAShalom; Ser – Cooperativa de Solidariedade Social; Associação de Beneficência Luso-Alemã; Administração Regional de Saúde do Centro, I.P.; Colégio Santiago; CrescerSer – Associação Portuguesa para os Direitos dos Menores de da Família; Clube do Bebê Pingo Doce; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens do Montijo; Câmara Municipal de Cascais; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens de Coruche; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens da Amadora; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens de Lisboa Ocidental; Associação de Proteção à Infância da Ajuda; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens de Peso da Régua.

⁹ See the programme for the next action already scheduled for Nov/2023 at <https://prochildcolab.pt/i-encontro-internacional-prochild-colab-o-pacto-para-a-infancia/agenda/>.

- 2nd** The guarantee of adequate pre-conception and pregnancy monitoring for all pregnant women, involving the public, private and solidarity networks whenever necessary.
- 3rd** The creation of “highways” for access to:
- i. Medical speciality consultations for children between 0 and 6 years old, whenever the need is signalled;
 - ii. Family doctors for families with children, prioritising those living in poverty and social exclusion.
- 4th** Higher investment in health promotion, namely through the creation of multidisciplinary teams exclusively dedicated to health promotion/disease prevention and research, as well as recognising/articulating with the work carried out in the social sector.
- 5th** Strengthening the national and local capacity of the National Early Childhood Intervention System.
- 6th** The extension of the network of crèches (without deteriorating adult/child ratios) and other appropriate and qualified services, with a view to achieving full national coverage of 0–3-year-olds.
- 7th** The evaluation and progressive improvement of the free crèche policy.
- 8th** The discussion and approval of pedagogical guidelines for crèches, in line with educational continuity with pre-school.
- 9th** The data collection and systematisation to allow to better understand:
- i. The reality in which children live, breaking down by year between the ages of 0 and 6;
 - ii. The real health coverage of the population, consolidating data from the NHS, private, and social institutions (directly or through regular surveys), from the dual perspective of response to illness and adherence to health monitoring programmes;
 - iii. The valuing, recording and supporting of innovative experiences in the field, facilitating their dissemination in order to motivate other

groups/professionals to develop local projects with the potential to be replicated on a larger scale.

- 10th Enhancing the role of municipalities and civil society organisations in carrying out these actions (given their proximity to the population), boosting the urgency and appropriateness of the actions and increasing their impact.
- 11th Media coverage of the knowledge available on early childhood development, in order to raise awareness and mobilise everyone (including family-friendly companies) to adopt behaviours (responsive and reparative) and policies that are suited to a greater appreciation of the first years of life.
- 12th The creation of a favourable and stimulating environment for attracting and retaining foster families, in order to generalise family-based alternative care as the measure par excellence for babies and children deprived of their biological family, while taking care to prepare the transition of these children to their definitive families (biological or foster).

The partners also advocate for the adoption of a global and integrated policy for 0–6-year-olds, as a means of providing a good start in life for all children, in which a secure attachment and a stimulating, protective and healthy environment are the guarantee that we are building a healthier and more sustainable society together. The social return on this investment will be maximum, as we know today that starting early is best¹⁰.

The realisation of such an investment requires intelligence and the ability to respond equitably. In other words, embracing the restlessness of not resting either on declared rights or on the global targets that have already been set, because at the centre of our action is every child!

A FAIR START FOR *every* CHILD IN EUROPE



¹⁰ <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/grafico-de-heckman/> (accessed in 22/10/2023)