



ETUCE response to the European Commission's second stage of consultation of the European Social Partners on Reconciliation of professional, private and family life

In response to the European Commission's (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) second-stage consultation of the European Social Partners on the issue of reconciliation of professional, private and family life,¹ ETUCE wishes to bring forward the following views which focus exclusively on the issue of how to increase the availability, affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare:

President
Président
Ronnie Smith

Vice-Presidents
Vice-Présidents
Paul Bennett
Odile Cordelier
Kounka Damianova
Jörgen Lindholm
Ulrich Thöne

General Secretary
Secrétaire Général
Martin Rømer

Treasurer
Trésorier
Walter Dresscher

ETUCE notes that:

- the consultation on the issue of childcare is a follow-up to the EU targets, set by the European Council in Barcelona in 2002, for Member States by 2010 to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and to at least 33% of children under 3 years of age;
- the Commission intends to put forward a Communication on childcare in 2008.

ETUCE stresses that:

In many countries, expanded provision of affordable early childhood education or childcare has been a vital ingredient in pursuit of gender equality and equal opportunities. The role of early childhood education as an important contributor to economic and social development is well established from this perspective, as is also evident in the EU Barcelona targets for childcare cited above. However, while acknowledging the importance of early childhood provision from a social perspective, and recognising that the purpose of early childhood education is dual, it must be stressed that early childhood education is first and foremost for the child and the child's opportunity to learn - to develop knowledge, skills and values.

As is becoming increasingly recognised, high quality early childhood education (ECE) provides the foundation for lifelong learning and stimulates children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive and linguistic development. The right to ECE is an inherent right, as laid down in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Thus, ETUCE calls upon the European Commission to adopt a coherent and comprehensive approach to the issue of childcare and early childhood education, comprising both the age group below 3 as well as children up until the compulsory school age², and to place the child's development and well being at the centre of the approach. The structure and organisation of early childhood education and care

¹ Launched on 30 May 2007.

² ETUCE and EI defines early childhood education as education taking place before compulsory education. This includes kindergartens, nurseries, pre-school classes, childcare centres and other similar institutions. In the publication *Starting Strong I-II*, the OECD uses the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) which "includes all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content."

varies from country to country, but should always include both aspects: care and education. All too often, the split between education and care results in inequality, instability for children, and low quality provision.

ETUCE has welcomed the increased attention to early childhood education at EU level in recent years within the context of the Education & Training 2010 programme. In February 2006, the Education Council placed early childhood education among the priority areas which must be given increased attention in the Member States,³ and in the Commission's Communication on *Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems* (September 2006) early childhood education is clearly recognised as providing the foundation for lifelong learning. On 1-2 March 2007, the Ministers of Education followed up on this at their informal meeting in Heidelberg. The central messages coming out of this meeting describe the early years of life as “*a window of opportunity in which the basis for all later learning processes are laid*”, and continues:

*“This is an opportunity to use the curiosity of children to create joy and willingness to learn as a basis for participation in lifelong learning. Particular attention must be paid to those children who are disadvantaged due to their personal, social, cultural or economic conditions. In this context, the Ministers attached particular importance to the quality of training of early childhood educators as well as the development of curricula and they highlighted the need of providing early childhood education institutions with adequate staff and funds.”*⁴

ETUCE welcomes these messages from the Education Council, as well as the Council's call on the Commission to provide for peer learning activities in the field of early childhood education.⁵ ETUCE is particularly pleased to note the importance granted to the quality of training of early childhood educators. Teacher education for early childhood educators should be at a high academic level, on a par with the academic level for teacher education for primary school and onwards, and access to continuous professional development should be secured. Well-educated professionals are clearly a prerequisite for high-quality early childhood education.

ETUCE highlights that there also is a key role for the EU to promote research on early childhood education through its funding programmes and to promote the collection of comparable data between Member States in this field. In this context, the prospect of having early childhood education included among the priority areas for funding under the integrated Lifelong Learning Programme as from 2008 is a welcomed development. Coordination and synergy effects between the projects supported under the European Social Fund on ‘childcare’ and the projects under the Lifelong Learning Programme on ‘early childhood education’ should be sought.

At EU level, as well as at national, regional and local level, ETUCE calls for close cooperation and coordination between the different authorities involved in early childhood education, typically the authorities responsible for respectively social affairs and education, in order to give equal importance to the dual purpose which early childhood education serves in society. In the opinion of ETUCE, early childhood education should at national level be integrated into the national education system and ideally be under the auspices of the Ministries of Education or their equivalents.

³ Key Messages from the Education Council to the Spring European Council, February 2006.

⁴ *Education Unites* - Conference of the European Education Ministers, Heidelberg, 1/2 March 2007: FINAL COMMUNIQUÉ.

⁵ Ibid.

With a view to the Commission's further work on childcare and early childhood education, ETUCE refers to the attached Policy Paper on Early Childhood Education, adopted in December 2006 by the Education International Pan-European Structure, of which ETUCE is a part. This Policy Paper sets out in detail the views of ETUCE on the quality, affordability and accessibility of early childhood education, including views on: assessment and evaluation; the need for well-educated teachers and qualified leaders; ratios and group sizes; children with special needs and children at risk; children of ethnic minorities; continuity within the education system; children's influence and cooperation with parents; long-term effects of early childhood education; research and data needs.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has proposed to the Commission that the European Social Partners should be asked, as part of the European Social Dialogue, to develop recommendations on how to increase the availability, accessibility and quality of childcare.⁶ As the Industry Federation for Education under the ETUC, ETUCE looks forward to being further consulted on the Commission's further work on the issue of childcare and early childhood education.

Brussels, 12 July 2007

⁶ ETUC Position on the First stage of consultation of the Social Partners at Community level on the reconciliation of Professional, Private and Family Life, December 2006.