

Young Roma children¹ and their families

When you pay attention to the beginning of the story, you can change the whole story²

There is ample evidence as to the importance of early years for providing a good start in life for every child. Compelling arguments indicate that the most vulnerable children will benefit the most in early childhood from quality conditions and experiences at home, in services, and in the communities where they live.³ Young Roma children have an equal right to thrive. The fulfilment of this right calls for urgent and comprehensive measures and coordinated public investment.

There is general concern about how effective Roma inclusion policy measures are at the European level. When it comes to Roma children under six years of age, especially the youngest ones, there is still a wide knowledge gap hindering the development of responsive and effective policies.

The challenges faced by young Roma children and their families are often multi-layered and intersectional, with negative impacts upon many aspects of their lives. When

1 When referring to young Roma children, the paper considers Roma children of an age between conception and six years old.

2 Raffi Cavoukian, Canadian singer-lyricist and author of Armenian descent born in Egypt, best known for his children's music.

3 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2023) *Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development*. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

looking at the five inter-related and indivisible components of nurturing care⁴ that young children need to reach their full potential (good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and quality opportunities for early learning), young Roma children are still lagging behind their peers in many countries in Europe. These significant disparities are very often aggravated by poor living conditions and persistent discrimination, social exclusion, and marginalisation in the environments where they live, develop, grow, and learn. Adding to the existing evidence available on the Roma population in Europe,⁵ **data recently collected by ISSA through its Europe-wide Romani Early Years Network initiative (2022)**⁶ focused on the situation of young Roma children aged 0–6, highlighted the following issues affecting them.

1. FAMILY STATUS AND LIVING CONDITIONS ---

MAIN CHALLENGES: Low education level, high unemployment rate, poor living conditions, barriers to accessing financial support

- ▶ 7 out of 10 Roma family members with young children are unemployed or unable to work
- ▶ 3 out of 10 Roma children live in areas exposed to the harmful effects of air pollution
- ▶ 1 in 10 Roma families do not have access to clean water and 2 out of 10 Roma households with children under 6 do not have access to running water

2. HEALTH, NUTRITION AND WELL-BEING ---

MAIN CHALLENGES: Lack of available, accessible and affordable quality healthcare for pregnant women and infants,⁷ inadequate immunisation, barriers to accessing family and emotional support and prevention services, poor dietary habits and routines

- ▶ 4 out of 10 Roma women do not receive enough medical attention during their pregnancy
- ▶ 3 out of 10 Roma families with young children cannot afford to have one nutritious meal at least every two days per week
- ▶ 5 in 10 Roma families do not ask for professional support when feeling down or unhappy

4 World Health Organisation (WHO), World Bank Group (WBG) and UNICEF (2018) *Nurturing Care Framework*

5 FRA Roma Survey 2021: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/data-and-maps/2023/roma-survey-2021>

6 International Step by Step Association (2023) *Breaking the silence, The right of young Roma children in Europe to develop and thrive*, Roma Studies Group. CEG. CREA. University of Barcelona. This qualitative study explores the status of young Roma children and their families in 11 countries in Europe (Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Kosovo, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine): *European REYN Early Childhood Study at a glance – REYN*

7 This, for example, results in high infant mortality in regions with a concentrated Roma population: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/presentations/roma-health>

3. EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

MAIN CHALLENGES: Lack or scarce availability and proximity of early childhood education and care services and other learning spaces or facilities, poor quality of services, language barriers

- ▶ 6 out of 10 Roma children under 3 years of age do not have early childhood education and care (ECEC) services near their homes
- ▶ 5 out of 10 young Roma children do not have public parks or playgrounds near their homes (and only 2 out of 10 young Roma children can benefit from sports facilities near their homes)
- ▶ On average, 7 out of 10 Roma children have difficulties understanding the main language of instruction when attending ECEC services

4. RESPONSIVE PARENTING

MAIN CHALLENGES: Roma mothers (the primary caregivers) have insufficient support from other family members, lack of support for strengthening parental skills, lack of information among caregivers about children's development, scarce educational resources in the mother tongue

- ▶ 3 out of 10 Roma mothers are the main or only caregiver for their children
- ▶ 7 out of 10 Roma mothers sing or tell stories to their children on a frequent basis

5. SAFETY AND SECURITY

MAIN CHALLENGES: Lack of home ownership, legal residence or insecure housing resulting in forced evictions, absence of social security or social protection, growing up in segregated settlements or neighbourhoods exposed to crime, violence, and vandalism

- ▶ 4 out of 10 Roma families with children under 6 do not receive any kind of social support
- ▶ 3 out of 10 Roma children grow up in unsafe neighbourhoods

6. DISCRIMINATION

MAIN CHALLENGES: Ongoing discrimination in various aspects of life, including access to public services, housing, employment, and education

- ▶ 3 out of 10 Roma children attending ECEC/kindergartens are likely to experience discrimination
- ▶ 1 in 4 Roma children under 6 years of age feel discriminated against in the playground
- ▶ 6 out of 10 Roma families with young children experience institutional discrimination for being Roma

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE EU AND COUNTRY LEVEL⁸

▶ **FOSTERING CROSS-SECTORAL POLICY COORDINATION AT EU AND COUNTRY LEVEL**

In order to create lasting change and a sustainable impact for young Roma children and their families, there must be cross-sectoral coordination across policy initiatives targeting the most vulnerable populations in Europe. That means connecting efforts in education, health, social protection, housing, and employment policies and programmes, fostering partnerships among public, private, and non-governmental stakeholders and addressing discriminatory barriers and practices.

▶ **LEVERAGING THE EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE POLICY OPPORTUNITY**

Member States should pay specific attention to young Roma children and their families as part of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. This would involve developing targeted interventions to ensure young Roma children's access to quality education and learning opportunities, healthcare, housing, and nutrition. Measures to promote social inclusion and to combat antigypsyism are needed to provide equal opportunities for development and growth from the start, and to foster long-term improvements and outcomes in Roma children's lives.

▶ **PRIORITISING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THE BARCELONA TARGETS**

The EU should continuously call on Member States to introduce and implement ambitious national plans to improve access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, prioritising the most vulnerable children, specifically Roma children. Leveraging the Council Recommendation on the Barcelona targets can help bridge the gap between Roma and non-Roma children from an early age.

▶ **PRIORITISING CHILD- AND FAMILY-CENTRED NATIONAL ROMA STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS**

For effective implementation of the National Roma Strategic Frameworks, European countries must prioritise the improvement of the situation for young Roma children and their parents to encourage long-term positive change. Member States must adopt adequate measures and policies in key areas impacting children's healthy and rounded development. These include living conditions, healthcare access and well-being, safety and security, quality early learning and responsive parenting.

▶ **COMBATING ANTIGYPSYISM**

Discrimination and antigypsyism have profound effects on all aspects of life. Therefore, European institutions and countries should implement effective measures to fight against antigypsyism – particularly against young Roma children and their families – in key areas hindering child development and family well-being. Countries must also enable and build Roma families capacity for full and active participation in decision-making processes.

▶ **MAKING DATA-INFORMED DECISIONS**

To improve the situation of young Roma children and their families, all policies and actions affecting their lives should be informed by sound data indicating the nature and magnitude of the structural challenges to be addressed. Disaggregated data on Roma children by age group (birth to three and three to six years old) is fundamental to developing responsive and effective policies and addressing challenges from the child's earliest years.

⁸ The key recommendations were developed based on the analysis of most recent data, studies and policies regarding Roma young children and their families (including the main conclusions in the *REYN Early Childhood Research Study*), and on consultations with all partners and civil society organisations involved in the *First Years First Priority* campaign active at the European and country level.

SNAPSHOT OF MAINSTREAM AND TARGETED EU POLICIES RELATED TO YOUNG ROMA CHILDREN

In recent years, noting the limited progress and in some cases, even regression regarding Roma inclusion at the European level, EU institutions have taken the lead in a series of initiatives to push Member States to take concrete measures to close the gap in access to basic rights between the Roma and the majority population, as well as combating widespread and persistent antigypsyism.⁹ To varying degrees, some of these policy initiatives take into account the early childhood period, and how access to quality early education services can be ensured for young Roma children. They highlight the main challenges faced by young Roma children and their families, and propose possible targets to be reached to overcome them. Of particular note are the following initiatives:

► EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020–2030

The EU Roma framework calls on Member States to ensure effective equal access to quality inclusive mainstream education, by halving the gap between Roma and the general population participating in ECEC (Roma children aged over three, 42%; general population, 92.2%). This means ensuring that at least 70% of Roma children participate in pre-school by 2030.¹⁰

The Commission also encourages Member States to proactively identify and remove the obstacles that prevent Roma children from going to pre-school, and from receiving good quality education at all levels in non-segregated settings. Moreover, it encourages the use of EU funding (ESF+, ERDF, InvestEU and RRP) to help improve the living conditions and development prospects of marginalised Roma communities and of Roma living in low-income households at risk of poverty and social exclusion. One of the goals is to cut the poverty gap between Roma children and other children by at least half.

► European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2022 on the situation of Roma people living in settlements in the EU

The European Parliament recognises the critical role of pre-school education in laying the foundations for success in school and beyond, in obtaining decent and quality employment and in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. It notes the significant gap in pre-school attendance between Roma and non-Roma children and the link between residential and educational segregation. It calls on Member States to adopt all necessary measures to promote and facilitate access to quality, effective and free childcare and pre-schooling for Roma children.

In addition, the EU Parliament mentions infant-mortality rates in Roma population which are alarmingly high when compared to those of the majority population, especially among those living in settlements. It emphasises that children in Roma settlements are being born into poverty and growing up in an environment that puts their healthy physical and psychosocial development at risk. It calls on Member States to adopt necessary measures, supported by significantly increased public investment, for the swift and efficient implementation of the European Child Guarantee. It also strongly encourages Member States to allocate more than the minimum 5% of European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) resources to supporting the implementation of the Child Guarantee.

Moreover, the EU Parliament calls on Member States to take urgent action to ensure that children in Roma settlements are supported by healthcare professionals from birth and in infancy. It recalls the over-representation of Roma children in care institutions and stresses the need for a child-centred approach that pays close attention to the rights and needs of the most vulnerable. It also calls on Member States to make early childhood intervention centres and community centres widely available and accessible, employing social workers, pedagogical staff and health professionals (including Roma health and educational mediators and assistants).

9 For an overview of EU action on Roma inclusion, see EU Parliament briefing: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690629/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690629_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690629/EPRS_BRI(2021)690629_EN.pdf)

10 https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030_0.pdf#page=8

► **Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation**

The Recommendation affirms that Member States should work towards overcoming all discrimination, inequality and disadvantage in terms of educational opportunities, outcomes and attainment, including (where relevant) by ensuring access to quality ECEC with a special focus on the early inclusion of Roma children, especially disadvantaged Roma children.

Moreover Member States are invited to ensure effective equal access to quality healthcare and social services, especially for groups that are most at risk or those who live in marginalised or remote locations. This includes promoting and facilitating equal access for Roma women to quality medical check-ups, screening, pre-natal and post-natal care, counselling and family planning, as well as sexual and reproductive healthcare, through access to (as generally provided by) national healthcare services. In addition, Member States are urged to ensure that Roma children have access to quality primary healthcare, including primary prevention programmes such as vaccination.

► **EU Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025¹¹**

In line with the Racial Equality Directive, the plan stresses that children from all racial or ethnic backgrounds must have equal access to education. Teachers must be trained to work with all children and be sensitive to the needs of pupils from different backgrounds, including on issues relating to racial discrimination. Schools should be safe havens, free from bullying, racism and discrimination. Children should be taught at an early age about equality, respect and inclusion, and be empowered to promote such values among their peers and in their communities.

The plan also mentions that discrimination in the housing market reinforces segregation, with a knock-on effect in terms of education and employment opportunities, which all have (in the case of families with children) a significant detrimental impact on children's development.

► **EU Child Guarantee**

In the Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021, Roma children are mentioned only twice as one of the groups of children in need that should be taken into consideration by Member States when designing national integrated measures, and when referring to access to early childhood education. In particular, the Recommendation affirms that equal access to quality and inclusive ECEC and education is central to breaking the continuation of social exclusion and securing equal opportunities for children in disadvantaged situations. However, the limited availability and high costs of ECEC can be a barrier for children from low-income families. Their attendance rates are considerably lower and result in worse educational outcomes and higher school drop-out rates, in particular for children with a migrant background or Roma children.

► **Council Recommendation of 29 November 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030**

This Recommendation emphasises that ECEC participation can be an effective tool for achieving educational equity for children in disadvantaged situations, including Roma children.

The focus on quality, inclusive, non-segregated ECEC in the revised Barcelona targets is welcome. Segregation, exclusion and low-quality services can significantly hinder participation in ECEC, with lower enrolment rates for some children, including Roma children.

¹¹ To support Member States in their efforts, in March 2021, the Commission established a Subgroup of Member States experts to elaborate the common guiding principles required to produce effective national action plans against racism and racial discrimination: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/common_guiding_principles_for_national_action_plans_against_racism_and_racial_discrimination.pdf

NATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TARGETING YOUNG ROMA CHILDREN

ROMA NATIONAL STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS AND THE FIRST ASSESSMENT BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION (JANUARY 2023)

National Roma Strategic Frameworks (NRSFs) were submitted by 17 Member States, seven of them accompanied by concrete action plans. Following up on the goal set by the EU Strategic Framework to ensure that at least 70% of Roma children participate in pre-school by 2030, measures outlined by Member States in their NRSFs under this objective include a wide range of activities. For Roma children, the measures refer to increasing access to ECEC, literacy in the language of instruction, support for Roma children to acquire digital skills, increasing school retention and preventing early school leaving and, to some extent, measures to help increase educational attainment and to successfully advance Roma pupils from compulsory to post-compulsory education. Several NRSFs mention the development and use of teaching materials in the Romani language.

Nevertheless, the NRSFs generally do not adequately address the removal of obstacles to the participation of Roma children in kindergartens, including those children living in remote, rural or segregated areas. Nor do they propose adequate measures to support the employment of Roma teachers, assistants and mediators.

ROMA CIVIL MONITORING REPORTS ON NATIONAL ROMA STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS (NRSFS)

Monitoring reports by civil society stress that insufficient measures and inadequate indicators have been included in the NRSFs to address critical problems such as the lack of available and accessible ECEC services for Roma and lower quality services. Though these issues are known and attempts to tackle them have been made, many of the policies (such as those related to pre-school) are in the hands of local governments, with limited support from national governments. This poses a significant risk to the success of the NRSFs.

FRANCE

In recent years, France has taken significant steps to address the challenges faced by Roma children in accessing early childhood care and education services. The government and relevant authorities have implemented various strategies and initiatives to promote the inclusion of Roma children and improve their educational opportunities. These efforts are guided by key documents such as the [French Strategy 2020-2030](#) and the contribution of [The Defender of Rights to the national strategy](#). Successful steps taken include the following:

Effective access to pre-school education

- Implementation of the principle of inclusion, allowing Roma children to be enrolled in regular classes while providing them with appropriate educational support.
- Compulsory schooling from the age of three, which is essential for future academic success.

Strengthening access to health and prevention services

- Enhancing the role of departmental maternal and child protection services; increasing the number of early pre-natal interviews; health assessments in nursery schools; child consultations, and home visiting services for vulnerable families.
- Experimenting with innovative initiatives, such as the Perinatal Path Coordinator to establish a personalised and coordinated perinatal pathway for pregnant women and infants. This aims to minimise disruptions in care and support for vulnerable mothers.

Participatory Health Centres and Houses

- The establishment of participatory health centres and houses is being explored to provide medical, psycho-social, and support services. These centres adopt a multidisciplinary approach and involve general practitioners, healthcare assistants, psychologists, health mediators, and professional interpreters. The participatory approach encourages community involvement and empowers individuals to actively participate in their own health improvement.

BULGARIA

In Bulgaria, the Council of Ministers has adopted the National Roma Strategic Framework (2021–2030) and the National Action Plan for the period 2022–2023 ([Council of Ministers' Decision 278 as of 5 May 2022](#)).

In these two documents, there are several indicators that refer to Roma children:

- halving the poverty gap between Roma children and other children (73.3% Roma / 28.5% children according to data in 2020);
- a one-third reduction in the number of residents living in homes with extremely poor conditions (Roma 43.5% / 8.6% total for the country in 2020);
- halving the percentage of self-identified Roma in the relative share of children (0–15 years) living in material deprivation (64% Roma / 18.4% total for the country in 2020);
- The proportion of children aged from 4 to the age of compulsory primary education attending pre-school education with a baseline of 82.3% (school year 2020/2021) and a target of 91%.

However, behind these indicators there are no targeted measures for Roma. Instead, there are either universal access measures or measures targeted at vulnerable groups in general. Moreover, the early years are not properly taken into account.

A promising approach for improving the health and development outcomes of young Roma children living in poverty aged 0–2 is targeted home visiting by trained nurses and midwives. The Trust for Social Achievement Foundation implements the [Nurse Family Partnership Programme](#), supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation and also by EU funds. In 2023, an [outcome evaluation by the University of Utrecht](#) demonstrated that the programme was closing the gap between Roma and non-Roma children by significantly improving child-development outcomes and parental practices related to the stimulation of early learning and by increasing the duration of breastfeeding.

SERBIA

The [Teddy Bear Programme](#) started as a local project to support the inclusion of Roma children in ECEC services, through tailored activities for children under five years of age and their parents. The programme aims at empowering parents and caregivers to have responsive interactions with children, through reading, creating reading materials (such as soft books, collages, etc.) and role-play. Practitioners guide the reading process and support parents in acquiring confidence through educational videos, guidelines and tips. The programme was so successful at the local level that it was rapidly scaled up nationally, becoming part of the curriculum in ECEC services (related to both education and health) and home-visiting services.

The [Strong from the Start Programme](#), developed by the CIP-Centre for Interactive Pedagogy to support Roma parents with children aged 2–7, was implemented by state pre-school institutions at the national level for five years. It enhanced parenting skills, specifically through home visits for families with children aged 0–1 and workshops with parents and children aged 2–7. It also provided families with free educational materials such as personal storybooks, family card games, activities and diaries in order to encourage responsive parenting, positive discipline practices and the creation of safe playful environments. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between participation in the programme and children's socio-emotional development and readiness for school. Parents who participated in the programme gained more confidence, implemented more activities that encouraged their children's development and applied less severe disciplinary measures in comparison with other parents.

HUNGARY

The project **Inclusive Kindergartens** (Befogadó óvodák), coordinated by the Rosa Parks Foundation and the local municipality, supported by EU funds, develops sustainable integration models and an inclusive kindergarten system in the 8th district of Budapest, offering the first comprehensive desegregation programme in Hungary. The project not only provides support for marginalised communities, it also organises and implements institutional diversity and equity plans throughout public kindergartens in the municipality. Inclusive Kindergartens targets disadvantaged children (including migrants and Roma) attending public kindergartens, their teachers, and families. The project is an easily transferable concept aiming for every kindergarten to be inclusive: each kindergarten designs its own tailor-made inclusion plan and sets individual indicators and benchmarks which best fit the kindergarten's integration strategy.

“European countries must ensure equal conditions for young Roma children and support to their caregivers.”

SPAIN

Pilot Project of Inclusion Itineraries for people receiving the Minimum Living Income (Ingreso Mínimo Vital)

The project, financed by the EU through the Next Generation Funds, started in 2022 and includes the implementation of educational itineraries for Roma children and adolescents, reinforced by family intervention plans for social inclusion with support for accessing the minimum living income (IMV) and other benefits. This is aimed at improving living conditions and increasing the support available to vulnerable households.

Kumpania service

Kumpania service is an initiative between Generalitat Valenciana (Autonomous Community) and Fundación Secretariado Gitano (Roma Secretariat Foundation). It provides specialised and individualised support to public authorities aimed at improving the status of Roma children and adolescents, and their social and family environment, in order to promote social inclusion and education. It works at all educational stages: infant, primary, compulsory secondary education, continuing on to post-compulsory stages.

State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025

In Spain, more than 70% of people living in situations of extreme vulnerability (such as settlements and substandard housing) are Roma and half of them are children experiencing poverty and social exclusion.¹² In this context, existing policy and financial instruments such as the State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025, which includes a programme for the eradication of degraded areas, slums and substandard housing (Programme 12) with funding of more than 13 million euros, are highly necessary. The Plan has established an extended period of up to eight years for its development in order to accommodate complex actions, including re-housing, where appropriate.

¹² Fundación Secretariado Gitano, *Study of the characteristics and circumstances of people living in slum and substandard housing settlements in Spain: Estudio sobre el perfil y la situación de las personas en los asentamientos chabolistas y de infravivienda en España - Research portal - Fundación Secretariado Gitano (gitanos.org)*

KEY PRIORITIES FOR UNLOCKING YOUNG ROMA CHILDREN'S POTENTIAL

Moving towards the realisation of the fundamental rights of young Roma children means addressing the following priority areas.

Antigypsyism

In most countries in Europe, antigypsyism is one of the most deeply rooted obstacles faced by Roma children under six years of age and their families in many spheres of their lives (from accessing quality education and health services, to housing, and the labour market, etc.). It is crucial to promote an awareness and understanding of such discrimination, as well as non-discrimination practices, among the general population, and to implement policies and initiatives that foster greater inclusion, diversity and equal opportunities for the Roma community. By **addressing the root causes of antigypsyism and working towards eradicating discrimination**, more just and inclusive societies can be created in which all children, regardless of their ethnicity, have the chance to develop fully without fear of prejudice or mistreatment.

It is crucial to carry out constant and systematic evaluation, as well as to conduct impact studies on the effectiveness of support initiatives implemented in various contexts and countries. Evidence needs to be disseminated along with lessons learned in order to inform policy measures for overcoming the barriers that young Roma children face in accessing quality early childhood services.

Child poverty

Economic disparities and hardships faced by Roma families with young children are a common denominator across Europe. To truly address these issues and improve the quality of life for these families, it is imperative for policymakers and organisations to work collaboratively on initiatives that tackle financial constraints, enhance access to essential resources, and create more equitable opportunities for the Roma community. It is essential to guarantee a **minimum income for families** with dependent children and to provide them with the necessary support to engage in social, employment and educational opportunities. Programmes empowering and building the capacity of **young Roma parents to increase their level of education and readiness for employment** are needed to reduce the high unemployment rates. Moreover, measures **to eradicate segregated settlements – one of the most egregious expressions of child poverty** – should be taken urgently in all countries in Europe.

Maternal and child health

Universal access to healthcare for all pregnant women and their children should be guaranteed to decrease the high morbidity and mortality found among Roma families, to prevent chronic diseases and to ensure physical and mental well-being. This includes providing accurate and clear maternal health information with a specific focus on the needs of Roma women and targeted home-visiting programmes for vulnerable families with young children based on good practices with evidence for their impact.

Parallel to this, nutritional support for mothers and for families with young children and an insecure income should be provided, including **training on healthy nutrition, providing consultations with nutritional specialists, and offering food vouchers and health supplements to fight against chronic malnutrition** in the first years of life. Health supplements should also be given to counter malnourishment among Roma babies and pregnant Roma women in many European countries. It is well demonstrated that the nutritional status of the mother during pregnancy affects her health and well-being and that of her unborn child. After birth, the mother's own health and well-being affects her ability to take care of her young child. This includes **breastfeeding**, which is critical for infants.

Child safety and security

Many Roma families with young children in Europe live in inadequate and/or irregular housing. They live in areas which are segregated and unsafe, with limited access to essential childcare and healthcare services, and cultural/leisure facilities such as playgrounds and libraries. The poor housing conditions, the limited or lack of access to tap and drinking water, electricity and heating, impact negatively on young children's health. This is further aggravated by the use of hard fuels (or in the poorest families, the use of waste materials) for heating and cooking, which leads to polluted indoor and outdoor air and, as a consequence, chronic lung problems for young children. Unfortunately, measures for accessing adequate housing are inefficient in most countries in Europe and many Roma families receive no subsidy or other types of support from the state. **Cross-sectoral strategies** should be put in place at national and European levels to ensure that **young Roma children live in adequate, safe and secure environments**. **Housing, social work and integration in the labour market** should go hand in hand.

Early learning

It is scientifically proven that every interaction (positive or negative) or absence of an interaction in the first 1,000 days of life contributes to children's brain development and lays the foundation for later learning. The lack of exposure among young Roma children to quality early learning opportunities and interactions (compared with their peers in schools) leads to worse outcomes in later life. It is fundamental to bridge this gap by creating rich **early learning opportunities and services which are high quality, accessible, free, in proximity, inclusive, and embrace diversity**. This includes investment in building playgrounds and other safe spaces for play.

Parenting and family support

Empowerment of Roma parents should be fostered to provide young Roma children with responsive caregiving. This may include providing **access to home-visiting programmes and educational materials, offering parenting workshops or classes, and creating support networks for families** to share experiences and learn from one another. At the same time, family-extended attachment relationships should be promoted. This would lead to **shared upbringing responsibilities in community support systems** and **support to Roma mothers** in their parenting journey, impacting positively on their well-being and their children's development. Moreover, it is essential to **give parents from under-served communities a voice** and opportunities to participate actively in the development of local and national programmes designed for them and their children.

Cross-sectoral coordination

In most countries in Europe, there is still no clearly defined, national, multi-sectoral early childhood development strategy or other policy document, or coordinating body to oversee early childhood development policies, funding and spending across sectors, at the national or municipal level. **A comprehensive and cohesive approach to early childhood development policies, and their design and implementation** that addresses children's and families' needs holistically (specifically including the complex challenges faced by young Roma children and their families) is clearly needed to ensure young Roma children are provided with equal opportunities to develop and thrive.

Comprehensive support interventions that are implemented in various contexts and regions should be constantly and systematically evaluated to learn about the impact these interventions have. Lessons learned should be disseminated in order to promote policy measures that ensure the healthy and rounded development of all young Roma children and adequate support to their families.



Funded by the European Union and with support from Open Society Foundations. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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THE CAMPAIGN

The **First Years First Priority** Campaign focuses on prioritising children from birth to six years, with special attention to the first 1,000 days, and is rooted in an understanding that, from the first day they are born, all children are rights holders – despite their dependency status. The Campaign advocates for more political visibility and resource allocation to early childhood, focusing especially on the most vulnerable children – such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children in or at risk of entering alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty. With these aims in mind, the campaign works to ensure that early childhood development (ECD) remains high on the political agenda, by building a strong community of advocates at the EU and national level.

NATIONAL COORDINATORS OF THE CAMPAIGN:

- Bulgaria – [For Our Children Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement](#)
- Finland – [Central Union for Child Welfare](#)
- France – [Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance](#)
- Hungary – [Family, Child, Youth Association](#)
- Ireland – [Child Rights Alliance](#)
- Italy – [Centro per la Salute del Bambino \(Centre for Child Health and Development\)](#)
- Portugal – [Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso](#)
- Romania – [Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development](#)
- Serbia – [Pomoc Deci](#)
- Slovakia – [Open Society Foundation Slovakia](#)
- Spain – [Plataforma de Infancia](#)



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THE PARTNERSHIP

First Years First Priority is a joint initiative of [Eurochild](#) and the [International Step by Step Association](#) (ISSA). We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe. The [European Public Health Alliance](#) and [Roma Education Fund](#) are associate partners.

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