

# Childminding Counts: Policy Learning from an Erasmus+ Project

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The thousands of children who participate in childminding services, and their childminders, have been invisible in policymaking until recently. Ireland can learn from European experiences in formalising and developing the quality of such services. This article reports the findings of an EU-funded project to stimulate reflection and debate and inspire practice, research, and policy. It focuses on childminder-child ratios and a qualified and supported workforce.

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## Introduction

Almost 53,000 children aged 0–15 years participate in childminding services in Ireland (CSO, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Census 2022 was the first time this number was counted: childminders and children in childminding services have been invisible politically and in policymaking. The number of services is unknown, as they are largely unregulated. But if each childminder cares for four children on average, there may be around 13,000 services nationally.

Childminding's invisibility is ending, as policymakers reform and transform Ireland's early years system through *First 5* (Government of Ireland, 2019), supporting childminding into the system through the *National Action Plan for Childminding* (DCEDIY, 2021). The plan commits to regulating all childminding services, providing training and quality development support, funding, and financial supports.

Ireland can learn from European experiences in formalising and developing the quality of childminding services. Early Childhood Ireland led the EU-funded Quality in Family Day Care (QualFDC) project, partnering with Aarhus University, Denmark, and VBJK and Vlaams



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Welzijnsverbond in Belgium in 2022–2023, to stimulate reflection and debate and inspire EU practice, research, and policy.

QualFDC partners concluded that the minimum preconditions for quality include low adult-child ratios, a qualified and supported workforce, understanding of childminding's specificity, and a competent, well-funded system. This article summarises the learning on ratios and the workforce, providing examples of promising and effective policies and implementation, and considers the implications for Ireland.

## European cooperation

QualFDC activities involved three three-day learning, teaching, and training activities (LTTAs) in Belgium, Denmark, and Ireland, attended by the partners and stakeholders; country reports and fact sheets; reflection reports from each LTTA; and a final learning report and video (QualFDC, 2024). Each LTTA comprised visits to centres and childminding settings, and presentations by and discussions with policymakers, agencies, and stakeholders.

All partners learned from the differences between our systems and the similarities of our challenges, which shaped the themes discussed: professionalisation and quality development, recruitment and retention, and governance and management. Our aim was to learn and develop our respective organisations' capacities to advocate for high-quality childminding.

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## Preconditions for quality

### *Low adult-child ratios*

Ireland's complex regulatory ratios have been based on the mix of child ages in childminding at any one time, extending to 1:12 when children are school-age only. Denmark's regulatory ratio is 1:5 (although in practice often 1:4); Flanders's is 1:8, or 2:18 where two childminders cooperate. Childminding primarily serves children under the age of three in both countries.

Influenced by our learning, Early Childhood Ireland's advocacy for reform has focused on a maximum regulatory ratio of 1:4. (At the time of writing, Ireland's first childminding-specific regulations were published, setting it at 1:6.) Policymaking and advocacy continue to be impacted by an international research gap on the effects of varying ratios and group sizes on measures of quality and outcomes in centres and childminders' homes (Dalgaard et al., 2022; Early Childhood Ireland, 2024).

QualFDC partners shared experiences on the negative impacts of too many children per adult: caring and mealtime routines can become automatic; children may lack a warm relationship with childminders; childminders may not have time to play with children, support outdoor play, or engage in the community. The role becomes one of 'guarding' rather than education.

A systematic review affirmed the importance of a relational pedagogy, where positive interactions and respectful relationships can determine quality experiences and holistic outcomes for children (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Positive interactions, such as responsiveness and story-reading, are linked to better language and social outcomes. Negative interactions and lack of engagement are associated with poorer outcomes.

### *Qualified and supported workforce*

An undesirable outcome of the lack of regulation in Ireland is that a childminder can work her whole life alone at home, without any support or oversight agency. In Denmark and Flanders, childminders also generally worked alone at home, but both countries have developed support systems, inspiring the Irish participants.

All Flemish childminders work under the guidance of a family care organiser, operating through non-governmental agencies that select, supervise, monitor, and educate them. They unite childminders and parents, pay childminders, and invoice parents. Flanders recently established a system of publicly funded pedagogical coaching, provided by local nonprofit agencies, stimulating childminders' reflection and practice. A key lesson for Ireland is the importance of a trusting relationship between coaches/mentors and childminders. That the coaching happens in the home means childminders' practice can be developed in their real-life context.

In Denmark, professional learning communities are facilitated by pedagogical coaches, employed by municipalities, who demonstrate practice and support reflection with groups of 5–7 childminders and the children, one day a week, in a 'play hub' located centrally in the community. Children can play together and get to know other children and childminders. If a childminder is on leave, children can go to a guest childminder's home – one of the 5–7, whom they already know. This system is why a service might operate at a ratio of 1:4, to allow slack to accommodate a guest child.

The level of qualification or specific training for childminders in the three countries is low; none has yet set a regulatory minimum. The extent to which Danish municipalities offer initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) to childminders is patchy. Irish plans to develop an initial registration foundation training for all childminders and proposals for a qualification were of great interest to partners.

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This lack is challenging, as childminders with appropriate, relevant qualifications, training, and CPD are better equipped to provide high-quality care and education (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024); the specificity of training plays a crucial role in shaping interaction quality. Childminders were also enabled to manage stress and challenges effectively, further improving the environment for children and potentially recruitment and retention.

## Conclusion

This article summarised some of the learning from an Early Childhood Ireland-led project that aimed to stimulate reflection and debate on childminding. It focused on low childminder-child ratios and a qualified and supported workforce – two preconditions for accessible, affordable, high-quality provision. Ratio levels and the specificity of training and CPD also influence childminders' wellbeing, which can impact recruitment and retention.

Childminders should be considered professionals, as childminding is more than guarding. Childminders provide care and education before compulsory formal education in many EU countries. QualFDC partners stressed the specificity of childminding services. A childminder's home is an authentic pedagogical environment. It is no better or worse than group-centre-based services, and both must be of high quality to benefit children. Childminders should become reflective practitioners, aware of their pedagogical and social role. Well-qualified staff are therefore needed. This implies good working conditions with decent and fair pay, working hours, and pension, and a work environment that supports their wellbeing.

QualFDC concluded that the development and sustainment of high-quality, accessible, affordable childminding provision that benefits children requires a competent system with sufficient public funding. Achieving it depends on policy choices and political will. Childminding counts.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Childminding services in Ireland are provided in the childminder's home. Childminders are self-employed, operating small businesses. The legal and regulatory context differs from that of nannies and au pairs, who care for children in the children's own home and are directly employed by the parents.



## Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy launched in DCU's Institute of Education



Dr Joseph Travers, Professor Mel Ainscow, Dr Aoife Brennan and DCU President Professor Daire Keogh at the launch of the DCU Centre for Inclusive Pedagogy.